



Joy didn't belong in the hill country
...but there she was

Big City Girl



CHARLES WILLIAMS

An original novel—not a reprint

Big City Girl

by

Charles Williams

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-one](#)

[Twenty-two](#)

[Twenty-three](#)

[Twenty-four](#)

[Twenty-five](#)

Twenty-six

Twenty-seven

One

Eighty-eight.

Eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one, Joy counted, tilting her head over to one side and putting the brush down through the shining cascade of her hair. Why? she thought. My God, why?

From where she was sitting in the stifling kitchen she could look out the door and across the sun-blasted, sandy yard of the clearing to the encircling pines. Jesus, she thought, how did I ever get into this mess? And what *am* I brushing my hair for? If I was as bald as the first row in a burlesque house it wouldn't make any difference here.

Ninety-two, ninety-three. Oh, that awful ape, laughing right in my face. I could scream! Or die. Or kill him.

She was sitting before a small mirror propped up against a sirup pitcher on the kitchen table. Her hair was naturally blonde and quite silken and long, sweeping down to her shoulders in a sort of golden torrent, and she spent a great deal of time working on it and looking at herself in the glass. The mirror was a pool from which she drank and restored her confidence, a refuge from a terror that had begun to take hold of her in recent months. She had been born thirty years ago in New Iberia, Louisiana, and was a soul-searching and self-pitying twenty-eight when the black depression and the fear were upon her, but the mirror or an admiring glance could restore her happy belief in twenty-five as her correct age, because she had retained a large measure of the striking beauty of her teens and early twenties.

She had been at the farm for nearly three weeks now, and the fear had become an even more frequent visitor in the night. It was panic that had brought her here in the first place, though the others had no way of knowing this. For the first time in her life she had been thoroughly terrified and had lost faith in herself.

In the three years she had been married to Sewell Neely she had never met any of his family, and she really thought—she had announced upon her

arrival—she really thought, didn't they, that in this trying time they ought to all be together. It was terrible about poor Sewell, she had said to Cass, who was Sewell's father, still trying to drive out of her mind the way poor Sewell had laughed brutally in her face that last day when she had visited the jail and told him she didn't have any money left. She had been in one of her twenty-eight-year-old depressions anyway, and when his heartless laughter had ripped away the last of her sagging faith in her looks she had gone to pieces in panic and fled, spending her last six dollars on a bus ticket to Riverview, where, she had some vague idea, the Neelys lived. She couldn't go anywhere else on six dollars.

Jessie Neely, who had been watching her with rapt attention, turned and looked out the window. Hot sunlight struck vertically into the clearing and she could see Mexico, the big hound, walking across the yard with his shadow sliding along over the sand directly under his belly like a black pool of ink. I guess I ought to see if the butter beans are about done and put in the corn bread, she thought. They'll be up from the field pretty soon and we ought to have dinner ready.

Jessie got up from the table and went over to the stove to look into the pot of beans. They were all right, she thought. She slid the corn bread into the oven and straightened up with the simple and unstudied grace of a child, her face slightly flushed with the heat and the ill-fitting cotton dress hiked up above her knees. Her legs were bare, as they always were, and quite tanned, with a faint tracery of vine scratches here and there that only contrasted with and accentuated their smoothness. She saw Joy looking at her, and smiled. Joy was so pretty, and she was awful nice to a fifteen-year-old girl who'd never been any of the places she had.

She began to set the table. Joy looked up at her, with her head tilted over as she pulled the brush downward in long strokes. "Do you want me to move, honey?" she asked.

"No, you go ahead," Jessie said. "I'll put the plates down at this end."

"I don't want to get in the way. I wouldn't be a bother for anything." She bent forward to the glass, turning her head slightly. "Oh, honey, if you've got a minute, there's a ribbon in my suitcase, a blue one. Would you be a lamb and see if you can find it for me?"

"Of course," Jessie said. She put the plates down and went into the bedroom and came back in a minute with the ribbon. She watched Joy

admiringly.

Joy worked the ribbon under her hair in back and tied it in a jaunty little bow just slightly off center on top of her head. She examined the result in the glass. There, she thought.

“My, that’s pretty, Joy,” the younger girl said.

She is a lamb, Joy thought idly. Though how she ever had two such ugly apes for brothers is more’n I’ll ever know. Imagine that bastard laughing in my face like I was some old bag. But think of letting it scare me like that. Why’d I ever let it bother me? I can see right here I haven’t changed a bit. I look just like I always did.

And as for that hard-eyed Mitch, always looking at me like he was looking at something on the other side of me and I was just standing in his way, I could show him. If it was worth the trouble.

* * *

The land fell away here in a series of long hillside fields going down toward the bottom. The fields were terraced to protect them from erosion, but it had been done too late to save much of the topsoil, and it was poor, very thin ground that was badly washed in places and worn out from too many years of cotton. Now, in late June, the cotton was less than knee-high and of a poor color because there was little to feed it. There had been too much rain and it was being strangled by grass.

Down below, where the fields flattened out into the bottom itself, the ground was black and quite rich and the cotton had a good healthy color, sweeping out like a dark green carpet toward the fence and the wall of trees where the heavy timber of the river bottom began. Though it could not be seen or distinguished from the cotton itself from up on the hillside where the men were working, there was far too much grass in the bottom field also, and it was badly in need of cultivation.

The morning had been clear and very hot, with an oppressive humidity from the rain of night before last, but now in the stillness of midday an ominous black ferment of thunderheads had begun to push up over the horizon in the west, out over the river bottom. One of the men who was working up on the hillside stopped his mule at the end of the row and turned to watch the bank of clouds while he bit off a chew of tobacco.

He was a colorless, leached-out man like a sand-hill farm, dressed in a sun-bleached chambray shirt that was soaked with sweat. His name was Cass Neely, and fifty years of living had run through him, taking away more than they had given, and the emptiness they had left behind was stamped on the slack, rather pudgy face and the slumped tiredness of his shoulders. His eyes were a faded blue and there was about them an odd compounding of hopeless futility and hangdog friendliness, like those of a dog that has been kicked but still hopes to be liked.

At one time he had owned all this land, but in the fourteen years since the death of his wife he had sold it off a parcel at a time until nothing remained of his original property except the house and the few acres of timbered ground running down toward the bottom, and now for the past six years he had been engaged in the grotesque joke of working his own former land on halves as a share-cropper. The bitter mockery of this had long since ceased to bother him very much, however, for he had sufficiently withdrawn year by year from the harshness of reality until he had come to live in a dreamy and forever hopeful world of his own. There was nothing vicious about him, and the money he had received over all this period of time from the piecemeal sale of his land and farming equipment had not been thrown away on liquor or gambling or any other active vice, but had disappeared down the bottomless rat holes of shiftlessness and bad management and a perennially wistful fondness for secondhand automobiles. And now the deteriorating carcasses of seven of the defunct cars squatted about the sandy yard around the house wherever they had wheezed their last, giving it the appearance of a junk yard.

He leaned against the plow handles now and waited for the other man. Mitch Neely was several rows up the hill, coming in the same direction and making his mule step along fast. Just like a hawg going to war, Cass thought. God didn't make the days long enough for him and he walks his mule to death, and I reckon he'd work his own daddy into the grave if I was crazy enough to try to keep up with him.

When Mitch came out to the end and turned his mule around, Cass left his plow and walked across the intervening rows. Mitch watched him with impatience. He was twenty-three, with a thin, bony face and deep-set, rather small eyes like chips of flint, and the face was burned dark by the sun except at the temples, where he had recently had a close haircut. There was

a tall, very spare angularity about him, with long thin legs and no great width anywhere, but he had a kind of whiplike toughness and repressed fury of movement that spoke of more power than the lank frame would indicate.

"It ain't no use sweeping out these here middles, Mitch," Cass said querulously. "The ground's too wet, like I been telling you all the morning. We ain't doing nothing but just moving that there crap grass from one place to another. It'll take root again before we go to dinner."

Mitch kicked at a bunch of grass to shake the moist soil from its roots. "Some of it'll die if it don't rain again tonight," he said stubbornly. "And we got to do something. It sure as hell ain't going to commit suicide."

Cass waved toward the west. "Just going to rain some more. And it ain't more'n a few hours away."

Mitch glared in the direction of the thunderheads. "Well, can I stop it?"

"Ain't nobody can stop it but the Almighty," Cass said. "But just the same, ain't no sense tearing around the fields like a high-lifed shoat, plowing up grass that's just going to take holt again as soon as it rains."

"Well, I ain't going to tell the Almighty how to run *His* business," Mitch said bleakly. "But I'm going to keep turning this crap grass over till I wear it out, if I cant kill it no other way."

He turned back between the plow handles and slapped the mule with a line. The mule, expecting to be unhitched, was slow in starting, and Mitch swung the rein harder this time and cursed. They went off up the row with long, loose-legged strides.

Ain't no sense arguing with him, Cass thought. He's mule-headed enough to keep right on working if it was to come a regular gully-washer, and if it floated him and the mule away he'd still be plowing when they went down the river. I never seen a man cared less for the Almighty's will.

He went slowly back to his own mule and turned him around, sighing at the foolishness of it. Removing his hat, he ran a forefinger across his forehead to throw off the sweat, and looked at the sun to gauge the time. It was eleven-thirty, anyway. They ought to unhitch and start back to the house. Jessie would have dinner on the table by the time they got there—that is, if she didn't get to listening to Joy and forget about dinner altogether. He sighed again and shook his head. Sometimes a man just felt like giving up.

He was still standing there when Mitch returned. Milch looked at him and then at the sun and whirled his mule about to unhitch. We might as well quit for dinner, he thought. He'll stand there till he takes root if we don't.

They uncoupled the trace chains and looped them over the hames. Cass climbed on the gray mule to ride back to the house, while Mitch walked ahead, leading his.

"If it rains this evening and we can't work, I might go over to the Jimersons' and see if they heard any more about Sewell over the radio," Cass said, raising his voice above the rattle of trace chains. He rode sidewise, with both legs hanging off the same side of the mule. When Mitch made no reply, he went on, "It's kind of sad when a man's got to go to the neighbors to hear word about his own kin."

He's thinking about the radio again, Mitch thought. He's got that damned radio in his mind and nothing'll get it out. Next spring he'll be wanting to know if maybe Mr. Sam won't let us get one on credit at the store. Keeps on raining like this and the crap grass choking you to death, and there ain't going to be enough credit at the store to buy a can of Prince Albert, but maybe Mr. Sam'll let us buy a radio. Maybe Sam'll buy us all some blue serge pants and yellow shoes so we can go parading up the road while the crap grass gets so rank you could hunt bears in it.

Things wasn't bad enough before, but them long-nosed Jimerson boys got to come over every other day and tell him how there was some more about Sewell on the radio. God knows that what they was saying about Sewell wasn't nothing you'd think he'd want to listen to, but maybe he looks at it different. Maybe if they call you Mad Dog Neely and go on and on over the radio and write about you in the papers it's the same as if you was some big gun in the gov'ment and he ought to hear all about it so he can tell everybody around the courthouse on Saturday evening.

Well, it's all over now, and you wouldn't hear no more about Sewell if you had a dozen radios. Once they get you in there in the pen, there ain't no long-nosed bastards writing about you and talking about you on the radio. Not till maybe thirty years from now, when they might let you out if you behave yourself, or till someday they kill you if you don't.

Two

It was sweltering in the kitchen, and outside the air was dead. Out over the bottom they could hear the rumble of thunder, like wagons rolling across a bridge. They were at the table, with Cass at the head and Mitch and Joy seated across from each other. Jessie was filling their plates from the pot of butter beans on the stove.

Cass held his knife and fork upright, one in each hand, and looked at Joy. "Didn't see none of them Jimerson boys this morning, I reckon?"

"No," she said. "They haven't been around."

Cass sighed. "Guess there's nothing new about Sewell, then. Sure wish we could hear something."

"He'll write us when he can, Papa," Jessie said. "I know he will."

Cass dismissed this with a wave of the fork. "Wasn't thinking about letters. Mail takes a long time. And he wouldn't write, nohow. Now, if we just had a radio, like the Jimersons . . ."

Joy had been watching Mitch, who was eating bent over his plate and seemingly paying no attention to any of them, but now she brightened and smiled at Cass.

"You know, I was thinking the very same thing, just this morning. I mean, how nice it'd be if we had a radio. If *you* had a radio, that is. I'm just a kind of visitor and I don't really count. But a radio is so much fun. I just wouldn't be without one, ever since that first one I had. The one they gave me in the beauty contest. I told you about that, didn't I? About winning the beauty contest in New Iberia when I was just sixteen, and they gave me all those prizes and a radio was one of them. I sold some of the prizes, but I kept the radio because it was the cutest thing. Of course, I was a lot prettier then." She paused and laughed deprecatingly. "I'd hate to have to enter one now."

Mitch did not even look up. For a woman whose husband is going to the pen for life, she's sure got a hell of a lot to worry about, he thought.

Cass was thinking about the radio and was not to be distracted by trifling side issues like beauty contests. He said nothing.

Well, she thought. Well! Of all the stupid.

“Joy, you could win any beauty contest in the world,” Jessie said loyally behind her at the stove. “Couldn’t she, Papa?”

“Oh, sure,” Cass said vaguely. “Ain’t no doubt about it.” Come to think of it, she did say she won a radio that way. Maybe they could enter her in a contest now and win another one. Didn’t recollect hearing about any coming up any time soon, though.

“Couldn’t she, Mitch?” Jessie pressed warmly. Joy was their guest and she was the prettiest thing, and the way she was all broken up about poor Sewell, the least they could do was to try to cheer her up.

Mitch glanced up briefly, stone-eyed. “How the hell do I know?” he asked of no one in particular.

“Mitch!” Jessie said reproachfully.

Mitch shrugged and returned to the butter beans, vaguely irritated at himself and a little ashamed of speaking that way to Jessie. He was usually very considerate of his sister.

Pig, Joy thought coldly. He’s just a pig. His shirt sticking to him with sweat and he didn’t even comb that horrible butter-colored hair and his face looks like somebody chopped it out of wood with a dull ax.

Well, she wasn’t going to let him worry her. Plenty of other people were nice. She took a drink of water, holding her little finger out from the glass the way she always did when she was drinking coffee, and smiled becomingly at Cass.

“Are you really thinking about buying a radio?” she asked.

Cass cleared his throat. He had combed his hair before he came to the table, carefully pulling as much of his sandy fringe as possible across his bald spot. “Well, of course, you understand, Joy, I’m just kindly turning it over in my mind, you might say. It ain’t something you’d rush into. Man has to be careful, tight as money is these days.”

“But you *do* think you might? I think that’s nice.”

Mitch looked up again. “Any of you got any idea what you’re going to use for money?” We ain’t got any more land to diddle off, he thought. That’s all gone for them goddamned cars.

“Why, you can get one from Sears, Roebuck for five-dollars down, AC and DC current and batteries and all,” Cass said defensively.

“You got five dollars?” Mitch asked curtly.

“Well, no, not right now. But it don’t seem like such an awful lot to ask for. Man don’t ask for much in this world.”

Mitch turned his stone-chip eyes on Joy. “If you have, you’d better hang onto it.”

“I thank you very much,” she said coldly. “But I guess I can handle my affairs without any advice.” Oh, my God, she thought. How did I ever come to this? Looking right through me with those hard eyes of his as if he *knew* I didn’t have five dollars, or even one. Just a lousy five dollars. A cheap share-cropper that never had a nickel in his life looking at me like that. At me, and my first husband used to be connected with racing. I guess that’d put him in his place, if I told him what it means to be connected with horse racing.

“And,” she went on, “I had no *idea* that five dollars was such a *big* sum of money.”

Mitch wasn’t listening any more. He was hearing thunder rolling nearer through the pregnant hush outside and hating the sound of it, knowing there would be no more work in the fields this day or the next. They had not been able to put in three consecutive days on the cotton during the past two weeks, and he knew how dangerously near they were to having a crop go to grass. And that was not the worst of it. Pests bred in the wetness, and if through some miracle they could save the cotton from being strangled in grass, continued rain would bring the boll weevil and its war of attrition, which would lay the harvest waste before it was born.

Ain’t nothing to do but set and wait for it, he thought savagely. Nothing you can light or get holt of to stop it. You set and watch the rain drown it and turn it yellow and the grass grow up so rank you could get lost in it, and there ain’t even enough left at the end of the year to pay off the credit, let alone buy any mules. Every year is going to be the last one you’ll have to work on the halves, because this time you’ll have something left over to start buying back some tools of your own and some mules, if you can keep the old man from diddling it all off again on yellow shoes and another broken-down car, and then something happens. Too wet, too dry, boll weevils, or the price goes down, or something.

“I was kind of thinking of that old Mexico dawg,” Cass was saying. “He ain’t no good to us any more. Nobody ever goes hunting with him any more, and besides, he’s getting awful old. He just sets around and eats his head off, kind of a dead loss, you might say. Now, I know a man over Pinehill way, fella name of Calloway, Bruce Calloway—he’s one of old Eldridge Calloway’s boys, owns the gin over there and raises hunting dawgs sort of for a pastime—who’ll give me fifteen dollars for him any time I’ll let him go. Told me so many’s the time.”

“He would? For an old broken-down flea bag like that?” Joy asked, leaning on her elbows and looking eagerly at Cass. “Why don’t you take him up on it?”

Cass avoided looking at Mitch. “It’d take some thought, of course. Man can’t just rush into something like that. But it ain’t as if he was worth anything to us. Just eats his head off.”

“But, Papa,” Jessie broke in protestingly. “Mexico was Sewell’s dog. He thought the world of old Mexico.”

“Well, now. Baby Doll, you know Sewell ain’t coming back and Mexico ain’t no good to him up there. Besides, it’s been five years or more since he’s even seen the dawg. and I don’t misdoubt but what he’s forgot about him altogether.”

“But, Papa, he *belonged* to Sewell!”

“Well, like I say, it’d take some thought,” Cass said placatingly, still avoiding looking in Mitch’s direction. “Wouldn’t want to rush into nothing, but I reckon Sewell wouldn’t begrudge his old daddy a little thing like that if—”

Mitch shoved back his chair and got up without a word. Cass stopped in midsentence and the others were silent as he turned his back on them and stalked out the door.

The sun was gone now. Lightning shot its jagged brilliance through the gathering blackness overhead, and far out over the river bottom he could see the advancing curtain of rain. It swept on into the fields below and ran toward him up the hillside. He ran across the yard toward the shelter of the shed where he slept.

The old shed had been a smokehouse once and there still remained about it a greasy smell of fat salt meat and the thick smoke of winters long past. There was no floor except the hard-packed earth, but he had thrown some

planks on the ground beside the cot to stand on when he was undressing for bed. His clothes hung from nails driven into the wall, and there was a box on which to put his can of Prince Albert and cigarette papers, because he often smoked at night.

He had been living out here since Joy had moved in with them. She had come down off the hill late one afternoon, walking along the sandy road in her high heels and carrying the imitation leather suitcase, and announced she was Sewell's wife. There was only one bedroom in the house, besides the big front room where Cass slept, and now Joy and Jessie used that. Before she came Mitch had had the bedroom and Jessie had slept on a small bed in the front room with Cass.

He stood in the doorway and watched the onrushing vanguard of the rain go sweeping across the yard, sending the chickens scattering for shelter and drumming on the sheet-metal roof of the house. He sat down and rolled a cigarette and drew a match along the taut canvas underside of the cot to light it. There goes another day shot to hell, he thought, or maybe two, or God knows how many.

From where he was sitting he could see past the corner of the house to where three of the old automobile hulks squatted dejectedly in the rain on their naked rims and on old tires flat for years. In the nearest one, the 1928 Chevrolet sedan, three chickens roosted contentedly on the back of the front seat wiping their beaks on the upholstery and enjoying this shelter from the downpour. And now we got to have a radio, he thought. I thought he'd sold everything we had left to sell, but I forgot about the dawg. After he gets rid of Mexico I don't know what the hell he'll do when there's something he just has to have, unless he's got to the point he can start thinking about selling the house or Jessie. I reckon when a man's guts start running out of him it's like water running out of a broken dam, and the more runs out, the bigger the hole gets, till everything's gone. It's getting to where you don't even want to go to town any more, what with people looking at you and probably wondering behind your back how the Neelys are getting along share-cropping on their own land. It ain't no wonder Sewell went to the bad.

And now we got this Joy, going around half naked and shaking her can in front of them Jimerson boys, and somebody's going to get hurt over that. If she wants to start chasing around like a bitch in heat the minute they get

Sewell put away, that's her business, but she ain't going to do it around here in this house, in front of Jessie.

He threw the cigarette out the door in disgust and got up, too restless to face the prospect of sitting there all afternoon watching it rain. He took off his shoes and rolled up the legs of his overalls and took the old army raincoat off the nail. Clapping the floppy straw hat on his head, he stalked out into the rain and turned down the trail going toward the bottom.

The river might be rising with all this rain. There wasn't too much danger of it, the way the rain had been spaced out, but it couldn't keep on forever without the river's starting to come up. Once before, about seven years ago, the river had almost got their bottom cotton, the whole twenty-five acres of it. The levee he and Sewell had built across the upper end of the field had been the only thing that had saved it. He thought about it now, and the picture of that afternoon and night was still vivid in his memory. It had been just a few months before Sewell had fought with Cass and left home.

He padded down the trail on big, calloused bare feet, rain sluicing onto the old hat and making it flop down in front until he could barely see from under it. The trail skirted the fields all the way down the hillside and then cut out through the trees just above the bottom fields, headed for the river. The river swung in close to the field here, coming in a wide bend from the west across the two-mile expanse of timbered bottom and then turning south again a hundred yards or so out from the edge of the cotton and the fence.

The low place that had threatened the fields that year of the high water was a continuation of the river's eastward bend, probably part of an old channel long since filled in. It came on in and under the upper fence, a swale perhaps a hundred yards wide at the upper end of the field. When the river got up enough for that old channel to start carrying water, it poured right out across the whole bottom field. This happened during the winter floods every two or three years, or had until they had put the dike across the upper end of it, but of course during the winter there was no crop for it to damage.

He went on out and looked at the river. It was somewhat high and roily, with occasional small bits of drift going by, but it was far from high enough to be dangerous.

Driven by a goading restlessness that would not let him be still, he turned and walked down the river, past places he and Sewell had fished together a long time ago before Sewell had gone, remembering some of the big catfish they had taken on their setlines, and the holes where they had caught them. He stopped for several minutes beside the deep hole and the piled log jam where Sewell had stripped one night and gone into the river to free a line fouled below the surface, remembering the guttering light of the pine torch and Sewell following the line down through the black water and the suspense and waiting and then his head coming out and then an arm and then the terrifying big writhing body of the cottonmouth lashing the surface to free itself of the hook and Sewell holding the line, laughing, and throwing it up on the bank. He thought of it now, hating the waste and saddened by it. Where did a man miss the turn? What poisoned the stream somewhere along its course from youthful recklessness to hot-blooded violence to cold and paid-for violence and professional brutality?

He left the river and walked out to the lower end of the field and went up through it like some lank, soggy-hatted, furiously ambulatory scarecrow, completely oblivious of the rain, looking at the cotton and full of black and helpless anger at the grass in it. He hated grass in a crop. It stank of shiftlessness.

Three

The dike was between two and three feet high and ran across the low ground for a hundred yards or more just inside the upper fence, and whenever he saw it he thought of Sewell and the night they had put it there. He came up along it now with the rain pelting the old coat, remembering the four mules abreast, wet and shining in the night with the lantern light on them, and his driving them, and Sewell filling and dumping the big fresno as another man would handle a garden spade, and all the while Cass puttering around futilely, going out to the river to poke meaningless sticks in the bank to mark its rise and whining endlessly about the Almighty's will. Sewell was a big man and there was power in him, not awkward or slow-moving or muscle-bound power, but smooth and relaxed and then suddenly explosive, like that of a big cat in its prime. And now, from what they said on the radio, he had the cold deadliness that went with it and was just as dangerous as one.

Mad Dog they called him, illogically, and he knew that was wrong. A rabid dog with its foaming mouth and helpless frenzy was a far different thing from a jungle cat.

Well, he thought, it's all done now and there ain't no help for it. The only thing that's any good about it, now is that the trial is over and they'll quit making a circus out of it.

He went up through the cotton, going toward the house. We can still save it, he thought, if the damned rain'll quit in the next day or so. The ground ain't sour; and it's growing all right and the color is good even if the grass is choking it. But it can't wait forever. He stalked through the back yard, across the hard-packed sand, hearing the rain's tattoo on the metal roof. Mexico looked at him from under the back porch and thumped his tail once against the ground. The Jimerson's Model A Ford was parked at the side of the house.

When he came around the corner, they were all there on the front porch, talking. Or rather, Joy was talking. Jessie was listening and working on something in the porch swing with a pair of scissors and a needle, and the two Jimerson boys were watching.

“—with your back perfectly straight, like this, and your head up, and don’t slouch. They make you do this for hours, with the book on your head, and then after you’ve learned that they teach you what to do with your arms and hands. But the main thing is walking. You’ll see my toes are pointed and straight ahead, and notice my legs.”

She had on what she called her sun suit, and this admonition was entirely unnecessary as far as the Jimerson boys were concerned. They had been noticing them. Then she turned her head and saw Mitch standing there in the rain like a bleak and hatchet-faced scarecrow under the floppy hat, and the book started to fall.

Jessie looked up from whatever she was doing in the swing and said, “Mitch, for heaven’s sake, get in out of the rain.”

The two Jimerson boys had been sitting on the edge of the “porch, one on each side of the steps, watching Joy walk up and down with the book on her head, and now they turned.

“Howdy, Mitch,” Prentiss said. He was the younger one, about twenty, somewhat plump, with a round moon face and rather shy brown eyes and unruly black hair that came down over his forehead. Cal was two or three years older, and his eyes were black and there was no shyness in them.

“Howdy,” Cal said. He looked at Mitch with casual insolence and then back to Joy, who was picking up the book.

“Mitch, Joy is showing us how to be a model like she used to be,” Jessie explained, breaking a piece of thread, with her teeth.

“Is that a fact?” Mitch said; looking bleakly at Joy and then at the Jimersons. “Mebbe you boys are figuring on entering a beauty contest?”

“Hadn’t thought none of it,” Cal said easily. “Why?”

“You seemed to be kind of interested.”

“Is that right?” Cal asked, and Prentiss looked at both of them a little uneasily.

Jessie had begun to feel the strange tension in the air and wondered what was wrong. Joy stood with the book in her hand, unnoticed for the moment and furious that Mitch had interrupted. She had been so happy, showing

them how a model walked and feeling herself the center of attraction. Of course, she hadn't really ever been a model or actually attended a school of modeling, but she had intended to for a long time after winning the beauty contest and had read about it and practiced a lot in her room, which was the same thing.

"Mitch! Get in out of that rain," Jessie ordered again. She stamped a foot on the floor.

"I won't rust," Mitch said.

"Well, come and look at the sun suit I'm making," she said, holding it up.

"The what?"

"Sun suit," she went on eagerly. "Like Joy's. Only mine's just made out of an old pair of overalls. See, I cut off the legs."

Mitch looked at Joy's scant garment and her long bare legs and then looked away.

"All right," he said shortly. We'll straighten that out later, he thought. We'll see about that. But not in front of these nosy bastards with their eyes stuck out on limbs.

"I'm glad to see you boys are so interested in being models," he said thinly. "There ought to be a big future in it for you. But ain't you afraid you'll miss something on the radio?"

"No, I reckon not," Cal said. "Why?"

"Why, there might be something about Sewell and you'd miss it. Ain't people depending on you to spread the news as fast as it comes in?"

Cal got to his feet. "Look," he began.

Prentiss stood up hurriedly and moved between them. "We better be going, Cal," he said anxiously. "We got to get to town and back before feeding time. We better get started." Cal scowled at Mitch, and shrugged.

They went around the corner and got in the car. Mitch followed them and stood there in the rain outside the window. Cal rolled it down.

"You know where your old man is right now?" he asked. "He's up at our house listening to the radio. He likes to hear about it."

"You boys are crowding your luck around here," Mitch said. They drove off and he walked back around to the porch.

Jessie's eyes snapped at him indignantly. "What did you talk that way to the Jimersons for, Mitch? You hurt their feelings."

Joy sat in a chair next to the door going back into the house. She stared at him frigidly and went on sulking.

"Now, what's that you're making?" he asked Jessie.

"It's a sun suit. Like Joy's."

"Well, when you get out in the kitchen you can throw it in the stove and burn it."

"I will not! I never heard of such a thing!" She clasped it to her, outraged. "Joy's got one. Why can't I?"

"Burn it," Mitch said. "I don't care what Joy's got."

"Well, I don't see why I can't wear one if she does."

Mitch turned to leave, then he paused and looked at Joy.

"Joy is married, and her husband is in the pen," he said. "Mebbe she wears it because she's in mourning."

* * *

At supper Cass said, "Wasn't no news about Sewell. I told Jud and Cora, though, that we prob'ly wouldn't have to depend on their radio much longer, now that Joy's going to win one in the beauty show."

It only takes one day for something to grow into a fact now, Mitch thought. He does it in one day.

* * *

It was shortly after nine p.m. when the Chevrolet sedan with the three men in it pulled up at the gasoline pump in front of a country store. It was raining again, and the man called George, who was driving, stopped under the roof that extended out over the driveway between the front of the store and the pump. The wide double doors of the store were open and they could see the piled and disordered jumble of merchandise on the counters and shelves and hear music coming from a juke box somewhere in the rear. The interior of the store was lighted by big unshaded bulbs hanging from the naked rafters, and moths fluttered around the hot lamps in a senseless and suicidal dance that sent shadows jumping along the walls. Light spilled out into the driveway and they could see rain falling through the darkness just beyond the edge of the roof.

A boy with long, slicked-down hair came out of the store and looked at them questioningly.

"Put in ten gallons," George said. He was heavy-faced and very smoothly shaven, with a snap-brim hat that bent sharply down in front. When he took the hat off he was always very careful to put it down on the edge of a chair or table so the brim could hang over.

"Yessir," the boy said. "It's wet, ain't it?"

"You hear that, Harve?" George asked, turning around to the back seat, "He says it's wet."

Harve wore the white hat that is the badge of the southern law officer. He had a long-jawed, bony face with eyes the color of brown swamp water and two gold teeth that showed only when he grinned. He looked at the boy, who was trying to put on an air of worldliness.

"You know, maybe we better agree with him, George," he said. "He looks like a tough bastard."

"What would happen if we didn't think it was wet?" George asked. "We're strangers around here and don't want to get in trouble."

"Well, heck," the boy said, still trying to look offhand and smart. "It's just something you say, like it's a fine morning."

"You see, George," Harve said. "I told you he was tough. He's trying to make suckers out of us. He's got us to say it's a wet night and now he tells us it's a fine morning."

"Don't pay any attention to him," George said. "If he tells you lube oil is sorghum sirup, just pretend like you believe him. I've seen guys like him before. All they want to do is start something so they can beat you up."

When the boy leaned over to put the cap back on the gasoline tank he looked in the rear seat and saw the handcuff connecting Harve to Sewell Neely and his eyes grew big. Harve saw the glance and winked at George.

"You see what happens to tough guys?" he asked the boy. "I killed an old lady because she kept beating up me and my pappy, and now they're taking me to the pen."

The boy looked respectfully at Sewell Neely, who had been listening boredly.

"Are you a deputy shurf?" he asked.

"No," Sewell said without interest. "I'm a prisoner. This loud-mouthed pimp I'm tied to is a deputy."

Well,” Harve said. “The Mad Dog’s talking again. You hear him, George? Maybe he wants us to vote for him or something.”

George was counting out money for the gasoline and trying to explain to the boy why he should put fifteen gallons on the receipt instead of ten.

“Way he talks, maybe he wants some of the gun barrel,” he said thinly.

“You just don’t understand the Mad Dog,” Harve said. “He’s a big man in the news.”

“Well, I could take some of that out of him,” George said. He turned around and looked directly at Sewell Neely. “Maybe I will, Neely.”

Sewell stared at him coldly. “You won’t get no cherry. I been pistol-whipped before.”

“Maybe you never had a real good job.”

Inside the store, under the hard lights, a girl came up from somewhere in the rear and stopped near the door at one of the counters. She was drinking a Coke and weaving slightly in time to the music from the juke box. She was a big, dark-haired girl with wide hips and heavy thighs that swelled against the sleazy dress when she moved. Harve looked at her hungrily and gestured with the manacled left hand. “Better take a good look, Mad Dog,” he said, grinning. “That’s probably the last of it you’ll ever see.”

Sewell Neely ignored him. Harve warmed up to his subject.

“Mad Dog’s having a good look, George, so twenty years from now he can remember what they look like. He’s laying in a supply. Maybe we better stick around a while so he can fill up good. We wouldn’t want the Mad Dog up there at the pen twenty, thirty years from now blaming us because he’d forgotten what a woman looks like.”

Neely listened to him with acute boredom and wished he had a cigarette. A smoke would taste good, and there was no use thinking about the girl. He didn’t look at her.

He was a big man, and even as he sat in the car handcuffed to the deputy and outwardly relaxed, there was about him the faintly signaled warning of poised and latent power, still, unruffled, but forever coiled. He had a large head with thinning red hair, and across the backs of his hands and neck and face there were large, splotched reddish-brown freckles faintly seen through the skin. The rugged, wide-mouthed face was possessed of the type of unsymmetrical homeliness usually suggestive of warmth, but there was no warmth in it and any illusion of friendliness was instantly dispelled by the

eyes, marble-hard, eternally watching, and cold. He was being transported to the state penitentiary to begin serving a life sentence for armed robbery, and his name had been much in the news the past few months because of his capture in a running gun battle with police leading half across the state and a sensational trial in which he had been convicted on two out of five counts of armed robbery.

If I'm going to wish for a smoke, though, he thought, I might as well go whole hog and wish I had a gun. I wonder if these two-for-a-nickel clowns really think they can get a rise out of me. They must think I'm some kid who's never been worked on before. Next thing, they'll be offering me a Coke and then taking it away when I reach for it. They'd probably think something like that was new and pat themselves on the back for thinking it up. They'd go pretty good shoving that pimple-faced kid around, but they should have got me when I was younger if they wanted to have any fun.

You can see they're used to handling chicken thieves and guys they pick up in crap games, way they got me in here, with one arm handcuffed to this horse-faced pimplehead and the other one loose. It's a good thing that old sheriff wasn't around when we loaded up to start. He's smart old stud and he knows his business and he'd have chewed their tails out.

Maybe, though, if you look at it another way, it ain't such a good thing for 'em, at that. If he'd been there to tell 'em how to transport a prisoner, maybe this time tomorrow night they'd be back there shaking down the hustlers around the beer joints and picking their teeth front of the courthouse, and I'd be starting a life sentence in a place I couldn't get out of. You both better take a good look at her, boys, because there's three of us that likely ain't ever going to see none of it again.

Four

Beyond the country store the highway swung west again and dropped toward the river bottom in a long grade. Sewell Neely knew this stretch of road very well and he could picture all of it for the next ten miles his mind as the car gathered speed through the rain. Six years ago he had worked in a sawmill a few miles beyond and had fished a lot in the river on Sundays and days when the mill was idle. When you came this way from the east, there were two small bridges, over sloughs, then the big concrete and steel bridge over the main channel of the river itself. Between the last two bridges, the road ran straight across the bottom on a high fill that was twenty feet above the swamp in some places, and at the base of the fill, on both sides, there was rank growth of young willows and cane that had sprung up since the road was built.

He turned his head and looked out the back window. There were no headlights behind them, and up ahead their own lights bored into the empty night with the rain curving and slanting into them in long silver streaks rushing out of the darkness.

They came down off the grade and over the first bridge going very fast. He sat relaxed in the corner with the manacled hand lying on the seat, seeing the glow of Harve's cigarette, and waiting. George was driving too fast, he knew, but if you were going to do it this was the best place. It was a good, friendly place because he loved river country and there was something a little like being at home about it, especially at night like this in the rain, with nobody around. It would be a good clean, sudden, and violent thing anyway, and better than a lifetime of slow rot with everything leaking out of you a little at a time instead of all at once, the way it should be.

He had always heard that at a time like this you thought of your home, if you had any, and your family and childhood and things like that, but for some reason the only thoughts that came to him were of the river, this one coming toward them at sixty-live miles an hour, the river on Sunday

afternoons in late summer, very slow then, and clear, with white perch biting if you were lucky enough to have shiners for bait. And suddenly, for the first time in years, he remembered the girl who had been fishing there alone one drowsy afternoon toward the end of summer, the way she had run from him, squealing with what he thought was terror until she had stopped and he saw she was laughing, and afterward the primitive violence of the two of them desecrating and destroying the somnolent hush among the big trees of the bottom, the heat, and the sweat, and the one bundled arm outflung along the ground, turning, and the hand clutching agonizingly at the grass.

That's a hell of a thing to be remembering now, he thought, and rose out of the seat and came forward over George, reaching for the wheel with his left hand. Harve screamed and the rear end of the car skidded sickeningly as it went down off the road and started to roll, going over sideways once and then end-for-end slantwise down the steep embankment and through the young willows like some mortally wounded big insensate mechanical animal in the extremes of its death agony.

* * *

He was at home again, lying in his bed close under the sheet-metal roof and listening to the rain coming down at night. There was a vast silence broken only by the peaceful drumming on the roof above him and he wanted to turn over and go back to sleep again, listening to it, but Mitch had fastened their arms together and then had fallen out of bed and was pulling his right arm out of its socket. It was a crazy thing for Mitch to do, he thought. Get back in bed, Mitch, and listen to the rain. You can't work in the cotton today. Quit worrying about it and stop pulling on my arm and just listen to the rain.

Then Mitch was gone and it was Harve who was pulling on his arm. Harve was somewhere in the darkness in the rear of the car and he was in the front, lying with his shoulders on the seat and his legs across George's neck. The car had come to rest almost upright, sitting on its wheels but tipped downward in front and canting over to the left, apparently leaning against a tree. The lights were out and the motor had stopped running and the only sounds were those of the rain and the ticking of the motor as it

cooled. Then he could hear Harve beginning to moan softly somewhere in the back. He moved, wondering what was broken, and could feel nothing but the terrible pulling on his arm.

He swung his legs up off George and pulled himself up on the back of the seat to get the weight off his arm and then came suddenly up against the top of the car. It was crushed inward until there was barely clearance enough between it and the top of the seat back for him to slide over, but he made it and fell onto the floor, feeling Harve under him. Both rear doors were sprung open and he could feel rain coming in on the back of his head.

Harve was moaning under him and he tried to find out which way he was lying, running his free hand along his body and feeling for something he would recognize. He found Harve's tie and followed it up to his throat and then went back along the torso looking for the gun belt. He found it, feeling the leather loops with the cartridges in them, and moved his hand on around. For a second it reminded him of running his hand along a girl's body and he laughed, thinking of the grotesque idea of Harve's slapping him, and wondered if he had been knocked crazy by the shock.

The gun was jammed in the holster between Harve's leg and the floor and it took him a long time to work it free. Harve was regaining consciousness now.

"Get off me, you sonofabitch," the deputy said thickly.

Sewell had the gun free now and he cocked it, doing it awkwardly with his left hand. Harve recognized the sharp metallic click as the hammer came back and caught and then he screamed.

"Jesus Christ, Neely, don't! For God's sake!"

Sewell could see nothing at all in the absolute blackness, but he brought the gun up in his left hand guided by the open and screaming mouth so near his face. Harve's right arm must be pinned under him, he thought, or he would have grabbed my hand by this time. The gun was inches in front of his own face and he remembered to close his eyes against powder burn.

"Oh, God!" Harve cried out, and then he shot, feeling the gun jump in his hand.

When he felt Harve's body strain upward and then go suddenly limp and relaxed under him, like some grotesque travesty on coitus and its climax, he felt slightly ill for a moment and wanted to get away. He had killed two men in his life but never one in this way before. One of them had been in a

fight with another hoodlum and he had felt nothing at all afterward except relief that he hadn't been killed himself, and the other was a man he had shot in a holdup, but the man had not died until two days later and he had not seen him die. He had only read about it in the papers.

But now he wanted to get away from Harve as soon as possible and he backed out the opened door, dragging the deputy's body after him by the handcuff, and let it fall into the mud beside the car. With his left hand he began going quickly through the pockets in search of the handcuff keys, and then he suddenly thought of George. He stood up, sliding the body of Harve along through the mud so he could reach in the front window. The car was only a darker mass than the night, blurred and indistinct, but he could make out that it was tilted quite far over toward him and resting against the bole of a tree just in front of the door, the fender and hood pushed in by the tree and the whole weight of the car supported by it. He felt for the door handle, but it had been broken off and the door had been jammed when the top was crushed down. He leaned his head and shoulders and left arm in through the shattered and constricted window, being careful of the slivers of glass remaining. George was slumped forward with the broken steering wheel in his chest, and when he placed a hand on his throat there was no pulse at all and the head slewed sideways with an ugly limpness that made him take the hand away.

He hunkered down beside Harve and began searching for the key again. Rain sluiced down and the clothes were soaked and it was difficult getting his hand into the wet pockets. Ankle-deep mud sucked at shoes, and when he turned Harve over to get at his pockets they were full of mud too. He found some loose change and a wallet, and he opened the wallet up, feeling in it for the picture he was sure was in it and not even remembering about the money until hours afterward when it was too late. His fingers located the slick surface of it and drew it out, and he threw the wallet into the mud. It was too dark to see whether it was the right picture, but he was sure it was, and he slipped it into the breast pocket of his coat, grinning coldly in the darkness and all the sick feeling gone. Maybe I'll live long enough to give it back to the lousy bitch, he thought.

There was a pocketknife and, at last, a key ring with four keys on it. He began trying to fit them one at a time into the slot on the face of the handcuffs, feeling the slot with his forefinger to locate it and orient the key

and then bringing the key against it and turning gently in an effort to insert it. When each one proved to be too large he slid it carefully around the ring clockwise, counting, and tried the next one. After he had gone around twice he knew they were all too large and were car keys and door keys and he threw them into the mud, cursing. Harve did not have it.

He stood up and put his head and arm into the front window again. George had to have it now, but reaching into and searching all his pockets was going to be slow and laborious, if not almost impossible, having to do it from this window, with one hand, and with the heavy weight of Harve pulling on him. He knew it would be absolutely impossible to get George out of the car, with the doors jammed shut and only one hand to work with, and he could not reach the body at all from the other window. But he had to have the key. He was beginning to react to the urgency of it, aware of just how many more hours he had until daylight and knowing he had to be far from here by the time the wreck was discovered. A man less tough would have been going to pieces with panic by now. .

He began with the pockets of the coat, not really expecting to find the key in any of them, but because he had to eliminate them in order to narrow the search and because they were easy to reach and the logical place to start. The shirt pocket was next, but there was nothing there except a package of cigarettes.

It took a long time to get into the right-hand trousers pocket, reaching across and bending his wrist and working into it a little at a time. He pulled the pocket lining out, feeling everything very carefully as it dropped onto the seat. There was some change and a knife, but nothing else.

He was wondering how he was going to get into the left-hand pocket, with George leaning against the door because of the way the car was tilted, when he remembered the watch pocket. He hurriedly slipped two fingers into it and then felt a wild burst of elation as the fingertips brushed against a small sliver of steel at the bottom. He hooked it with the fingers and drew it out and knew by the shape and feel that it was the key and that in a minute he would be free of the hated weight of Harve and could run. He withdrew his head from the window and started to bring out his arm with the key held between the fingers, but he forgot the jagged splinters of glass still remaining in the doorframe. One of them sliced into his forearm, cutting through the coat sleeve and raking deeply into the flesh, and he jumped.

There was a tiny, musical tinkle as the key bounced once on the doorframe, and then there was an age-long void of waiting with only the sound of the rain and the pounding of blood in his ears. It was gone somewhere into the mud and the impenetrable blackness around him.

Five

Mitch lay on his narrow cot in the shed behind the house and listened to the slow drip of water from the eaves. The violent downpour of that afternoon was gone but at dark the sky had been sullen and heavy, with weeping drizzle that might go on for days.

It was a hot night in spite of the rain, and he lay there sweating in just his underwear, with no cover over him thinking of Sewell and of the crop they were going to lose if it didn't stop raining, and trying to think of Joy without seeing her, which he had found out some time ago was not easy to do. It was a job that could have been accomplished easily enough by another woman, this clinical probing into the troublemaking potentialities of the inner Joy without being disturbed by the body she lived in, but for a man twenty-three and too long woman-less it was almost impossible to achieve. The problem itself was simple enough. In his opinion she was a tramp and he couldn't see how Sewell had married her in the first place—forgetting, illogically, Sewell's own flagrant contempt for morality—but he had, and there it was. You could see she was a bad influence on Jessie and she was going to cause trouble with those Jimerson boys, especially with Cal, if she didn't quit waving it at them like that, because there would be trouble and plenty of it before there'd be any dogs sniffing after a hot bitch around the Neely place with Jessie taking it all in. All that was simple and easy to understand, but what were you going to do about the fact that you couldn't think about it without seeing her and you didn't want to see her when you were lying there alone in the hot darkness with the ache in you. The mind possessed the ability to sort the accessible and the inaccessible into two clearly defined and neatly labeled little pastures with the insurmountable boundary fence running down between them, and to illuminate all this neatness and happy segregation with the clear, bright light of reason, but the sad fact always remained that this helpful light never extended any farther south in a man than the bottom side of his brain, and

from there on down the rest of him was operating in a gorged and distorted sort of wine-colored twilight where one luscious and long-legged bitch sticking too far and too tantalizingly out of a sun suit looked just like any other bitch doing the same thing.

She could have gone somewhere else, he thought, driving her off in the darkness. Why in hell did she have to come here?

He heard running footsteps spitting on the rain-packed sand of the yard, and a white wraith appeared in the doorway.

"Mitch," it whispered. "Are you asleep, Mitch?"

"What's the matter, Jessie?" he asked. "Come inside. You'll get wet there in the door."

He sat up on the cot and moved his tobacco off the box and pushed the box out for her to sit on. She located it with her hands and sat down. He rolled a cigarette and raked a match across the bottom of the cot. It flared, and he could see her sitting up very straight on the box, with her hands folded in her lap, the long shapeless sack of a muslin nightgown coming down to her unlaced shoes and her brown hair tousled and damp with the rain. She looked like a solemn and somewhat frightened child, and she had been crying.

"He was Sewell's dog, Mitch," she said defiantly.

"Yes," he said. Damn Sewell. Damn the old man. Damn me because I can't help her.

"He can't sell old Mexico. You won't let him, will you, Mitch?"

"How can you stop him? You know how he is."

"Can't you just tell him no?"

Can you say no to the river with a minnow seine? Mitch thought. Can you hold water in a basket? Water is soft and wishy-washy and it don't fight back, but while you're holding it in one place it'll get away from you somewhere else. It'll be the same way it was about that last car. We argued with him till we were blue in face and he says yes, yes, it'd take some thought, can't rush into nothing, reckon we really can't afford to buy no car, sliding away from you like water all the time, and then he goes and spends every cent of the money on a broken-down bunch of junk that don't run a month.

"He's going to the pen, Mitch. All his life he'll be in the pen, and now we won't even have Mexico." She began crying very quietly in the darkness

and Mitch reached out and took hold of her hands, feeling awkward and foolish because she was his sister and raging inside because there was nothing he could do.

She quit after a while because she wasn't much given to crying and because she realized she was just making Mitch feel worse.

"Do you think he did it. Mitch?"

"Did what?" he asked.

"All those horrible things they said he did. Do you think it's true? You knew him better than anybody else. Do you think he held up people and shot at the police and beat up people for gamblers? What do gamblers want people beat up for? And if they had to, why didn't they *do* it themselves and not get Sewell mixed up in it? Do you think he did those things?"

"Yes," he said. She'd know it if I tried to lie to her, he thought.

"But why? Why, Mitch?"

"Jessie, I don't know."

"He used to make wagons for me. At Christmas. With wheels sawed off the end of a round sweet-gum log."

I reckon an argument like that wouldn't hold up in court, he thought, but it would take a long time to explain to her why it wouldn't.

"Do you remember the wagons, Mitch?"

"Yes," he said, dropping the cigarette on the ground and looking down at the red coal. "I remember."

"And the rawhide harness he made for Mexico to pull the wagon with? That was just one year. I was too big the next year for Mexico to pull me."

It's fine, Mitch thought, when you're as tough as Sewell and they can't hurt you. Sewell's so stinking tough nobody can hurt him.

* * *

After Jessie had gone out Joy lay on her back in the dark room in her bed, across from the small one Jessie slept in, and wondered if it was going to happen again tonight. For some time, and especially the past few weeks, she had had trouble in the dark. It would begin with the gradual appearance before her, whether her eyes were open or closed, of a bust of herself something like the one there had been in the high-school library of Shakespeare or maybe it was Daniel Webster or some other famous writer,

except that it was unclothed and somewhat more comprehensive as to detail below the neckline and a little longer to include a full view of her breasts. Then the horrifying part of it would start. It wouldn't matter that she had looked at herself, or this much of herself, quite searchingly and thoroughly in the mirror not an hour ago, just before she went to bed. It would still happen. The breasts would be leathery and sagging, and her face would be lined, not really wrinkled like that of an old, old woman, but just faintly tracked across by time, like the face of a woman in her late thirties or forties in too strong a light. It would be the same face, there would be no mistaking that, with the little brown beauty mark of a mole just beyond the corner of the slightly pouting red-lipped mouth, but there would be now the revealing evidences that flesh has weight and can fall, and the skin would be coarser and all the pathetic camouflage of make-up would not be able to hide entirely the pitiless erosion of the years. Then would begin the panicky urge to fly from the bed and turn on the light to look in the mirror and drive it away. She would lie perfectly still and try not to think about the mirror, the way a man with bladder trouble would try not to think of the bathroom so far away down the hall. It's not true, she would tell herself. There's no sign of it. And then she would start to hear again the brutal laughter of Sewell there in the jail.

Three years ago he wouldn't have done that, she thought. Not even two years ago. I could have anything I wanted then. God, do you suppose I've lost that much of it in three years? I couldn't have. I can't tell any difference at all when I look in the mirror. I look just the same. I do. I know I do. I had a picture of myself then and held it up alongside the mirror, they'd look just alike.

Didn't that man in the bus station try to pick me up when I asked him how to get out here? Didn't he get that old look in his face and offer to drive me out? Oh, hell, he was forty-five, and one of those small-town smart alecks that'll make a pass at anything that's alive as long as ain't his own wile. The wheezy old bastard, smelling like tobacco juice. Then making me walk the last hall mile.

But there was that deputy sheriff up there where Sewell was in jail, the one named Harve. He wasn't even married and he didn't seem to think I was any old relic. He was a great kidder and a lot of fun to go out with and he could make a girl feel like somebody still wanted her, even if he did have

that funny habit of laughing sometimes when nobody had said anything. And that photographer from the Houston paper who came up to take pictures of the trial and wanted me to pose without any clothes on for his private collection. I guess he thought I still looked all right, because who ever heard of collecting pictures of old bags? I guess he knew a good-looking girl when he saw one, even if he was a kind of screwy sort of stew bum and said things that didn't make sense, like calling me Narcissus all the time like that was my name. Narcissus. That does have a cute sound. He was cute, too, in a way, even if he was a stew bum. He never wanted anything except to take pictures of me like an artist's model, and I liked that. Men are so damn messy and rough, always wanting to go to bed with you. But he was nice. It was a cute picture, too, and I wish I'd kept it, the copy he gave me, but Harve wanted it so bad I just had to give it to him.

I haven't changed a bit. I just worry too much, being stranded in a dump like this without any money and not knowing how I'll ever get out of it. Imagine, thinking I'm beginning to look faded and washed out when I'm only twenty-five. That's a laugh. I don't know why I get to imagining these things. Why, right now, as much as I detest him, if I even just smiled at Mitch he'd be pestering me all the time. God knows, I wouldn't have him on a bet, but if I gave him any encouragement he'd be following me around like an old dog. Him and his stuck-up airs, pretending to look right past me like I wasn't even there and acting like he thought I wasn't good enough to be around that kid when all I'd have to do would be to crook my little finger at him and he'd be hanging around till I'd get sick of the sight of him. I'd do it, too, if it was worth the trouble.

* * *

It was sometime after midnight when Sewell Neely came up the steep, slippery incline of the road bed and onto the pavement. Rain was still coming down and every thread of his clothing had been saturated and drowned for hours. Water ran out of his hair, and sloshed in his shoes when he walked, and ran into and stung the ugly cut on his arm where the glass had raked it. Harve's gun was a comforting, hard weight in his coat pocket, and the handcuffs dangled from his right arm. They were still locked, but the other cuff was empty.

I wouldn't never want to do it again, he thought. But there wasn't any other way. In the movies they open locks with guns, but I don't think these here are movie hand-cuff's and I've often wondered where all that hot lead goes when it splatters off of steel locks. But if it had to be done, I'm glad it was Harve. Nobody ever appreciated a good joke like Harve did, and he's got one now that'll stay with him. He was a great clown, all right, even if most of his ideas was old before he ever heard of 'em, all except that one with the picture. That was a pretty good one, and Harve was just the boy that could help you along with it.

He turned right and started walking in the direction the car had been traveling when it crashed. When he reached the middle of the long bridge and could hear the river going by down below, he took the knife out of his pocket and threw it as far as he could into the darkness.

Six

The rain had stopped sometime during the night and dawn had been gray with mist coming up from the river and hanging wet and dripping among the pines along the hillside. It was midmorning now as Mitch came up toward the house from an inspection of the fields, anxiously watching the sky for some sign that the sun was going to break through. If it cleared now it would be two days before they could work in the upper fields and nearly a week before the bottom was dry enough to plow.

He came up past the barn and turned the mules out to pasture, thinking impatiently of all the work that cried out to be done if they were to save the crop and could not be started until the ground began to dry. If it rains any more we're goners, he thought. It's got to stop. We won't even pay off the credit and we'll be rooting for acorns like the hogs this winter if it keeps on. He cut across the yard, walking silently on the white, hard, rain-packed sand, and nodded a solemn greeting to Mexico as the big hound came out from under the house. Mexico approached him with the stately dignity of age and high rank and shoved a moist black nose against his palm in courtly salutation.

Mitch gave the pendulous chops an affectionate slap with his hand and went on toward the house, hearing now the excited rattle of voices somewhere out in front.. He turned and started around the corner and was hit a glancing blow by Jessie, running full tilt along the side of the house. She bounced off him, frozen-faced, unrecognizing, her eyes full of the horror she was running from, and ran on toward the barn. He saw her go at full flight into the door and turned and ran after her. She was nowhere in sight in the gloomy interior among the empty stalls, but the door of the corn crib was open and he bent over and went in. She was huddled on the pile of unhusked corn with her face in her arms against the wall, not crying, for there-was no sound of crying, but her body was shaking as if with chill.

“Jessie, what’s the matter? What is it, Jessie?” he asked, afraid, and conscious of the old helplessness he always felt when confronted with her problems because they were never the same as his and he could not understand them or cope with them, no matter how much he ached to help her.

She did not answer and he knelt down awkwardly beside her and put a hand on her shoulder. It was still shaking badly and she drew away from his touch as if she would burrow into the corn and escape from sight.

“Go ‘way, Mitch,” she said in a muffled voice.

“What is it?” he asked again.

“Don’t look at me. Go ‘way.”

“Are you hurt?” She shook her head.

“Do you feel bad?”

She shook her head again and drew away.

“Can I do anything?”

“No,” she said in the same muffled voice. “Only go away. I’ll be all right in a little while.”

He stood up, wooden-faced, and went back out the door and across the yard, walking fast. Cass and Joy were sitting on the steps of the front porch and Prentiss Jimerson was walking up and down in front of them bursting with his story and they all talked at once.

“He escaped, Mitch,” Prentiss said breathlessly, in a hurry to get it out before the others could beat him to it.

“Got clean away. They can’t find hide or hair of him,” Cass broke in.

“Killed a deputy,” Prentiss said, verbally shoving Cass aside. “It’s all over the radio, in the news. More’n it was before. Wrecked the car, shot the deputy, and couldn’t find the keys to the handcuffs so he sawed off his hand with a pocketknife.”

“He did what?” Mitch asked.

“Cut the deputy’s hand off that he was handcuffed to,” Prentiss went on in an eruption of words, too excited to see the fury in Mitch’s face.

”And you come over here and told that in front of Jessie? Why, you long-nosed sonofabitch!” Mitch said with the singing edge of violence in his voice. He took a step toward Prentiss and the youth backed up with his hands held out placatingly and shocked bewilderment on his face.

“Hold on, Mitch,” he pleaded. “I ain’t done nothing. I just said what was on the radio.”

“You didn’t have to say it in front of Jessie. You better go on home. When we want any more of your goddamned news, we’ll send for you.”

Prentiss looked from Mitch over to Cass as if for support, with his face puzzled and hurt. He had always been somewhat in awe of both the Neely boys, and this violent reception of his news, especially after the way Cass and Miss Joy had hung onto his words, was disconcerting and a little frightening.

“Well, I didn’t mean no harm,” he said. He looked around at all of them and turned to go. Cass started to say something but glanced toward Mitch and changed his mind.

“Thanks for telling us, Prentiss,” Joy called after him. She threw a spiteful glance at Mitch.

After Prentiss had shuffled his deflated way up the road Cass stirred uncomfortably on the step. “That was a cruel thing to say to a neighbor, Mitch. You oughtn’t to talk like that,” he said, not looking up.

Mitch thought of Jessie trying to shut out the sight and the thought of it by burrowing her face into her arms out in the barn and felt no sympathy for Prentiss. It *wasn’t* his fault, if you thought about it, but maybe the big-mouthed fool would stay away from her the next time he had any news like that.

“What about Jessie?” he asked coldly.

“Well, she’d have to know sooner or later. No way you could help that. Now you’ve insulted him like that, he won’t come back no more.”

“I can stand it,” Mitch said.

“We won’t hear no more news about Sewell,” Cass said querulously.

Mitch stared at him. “That’ll be all right, too. I don’t want to hear no more of that news about Sewell.”

Cass sighed and looked at the ground. “A hard heart is a sin. You got no feeling for your brother.”

“Listening to it ain’t going to help him.”

“You just got no feeling for him.” Cass brought out a soiled bandanna handkerchief and dabbed futilely at his eyes. “I tried to raise my boys up to be Christians,” he said tearfully to Joy. “But I reckon it’s a judgment of

some kind on me that they're so hardhearted. It's a sin visited on the father."

I hope the old goat ain't going to cry, Joy thought. She patted his arm. "Don't take it so hard, Cass. It'll work out all right."

"It's an awful thing," Cass went on piteously. "Thinking of that boy out there somewheres running from the law and prob'ly hurt and hunted down like a wild animal and we don't even know where he is and got no way of finding out. He might be shot right now with a bullet in him and we'd never know. Got no radio, and no nothing. I reckon nobody cares, though. Ev'body's got to be hardhearted."

Mitch looked at both of them with contempt and turned and went around the corner of the house, feeling the sickness in his stomach. If we had a radio, he thought, and could set and listen to the news, everything would be all right and we'd find out that Sewell didn't hold up nobody or kill no deputy or butcher him up with a knife. That's all we need—more news.

Because he had to be doing something, he went out to the woodpile behind the house and began splitting wood for the kitchen stove, attacking the pile of red-oak blocks with a bitter violence to shut out his thoughts. In a little while Jessie came out of the barn and went past him toward the kitchen, looking straight ahead like an Indian. Mexico trotted toward her but she went on past him and into the house. Mitch watched her helplessly and left her alone. There's nothing you can do, he thought.

He looked up suddenly, and dropped the ax. Cass had come around the corner of the house carrying a short length of old plowline in his hand. He stopped a whistled to Mexico, not looking toward Mitch.

Mitch watched him. Well, he's got it squared around his mind till it's all right, he thought. I should have known I was just making it easier for him when I bounced that damn Prentiss out of here. He works it around in his mind till all the facts agree with him and then he goes ahead.

He walked over to where Cass was knotting the line about Mexico's neck.

"You going somewhere with Mexico?" he asked, choking on the fury inside him but keeping his voice quiet because he didn't want Jessie to hear it in the kitchen and because he knew he was fighting water that would flow around him until he drowned in it without ever finding a solid place to hit.

“I ain’t one to put a dawg ahead of my family,” Cass said with martyred politeness.

“I didn’t say nothing about that. I said, where you going with Mexico?”

“Ain’t air one around here that’s got more regard for Mexico than I have, but my family comes first with me.”

You could talk all day and never get an answer, Mitch thought. “Where you going with Mexico?” he insisted.

“Maybe it’s my fault that I ain’t hardhearted enough to just set here and do nothing while they chase my boy around the state with guns like he was a wild animal and not do nothing about it and not even know where he is, but that’s the way I am, and I’m getting too old to change.”

“You figure that’s going to be a big help to Sewell, setting in front of a radio and hearing ‘em talk about him?”

“No. It won’t help Sewell none, unless there’s some way the Almighty can let him know that there was at least one of us cared enough about him to try to find out where he was.”

I could stop him, Mitch thought. It ain’t that I ain’t big enough to stop him, but it’s what would happen afterward. Any man can raise his hand against his daddy if he wants to, when he’s big enough, but he can’t never live with him any more. Sewell did it when he sold his guitar, he hit him and called him a name nobody can call his own daddy and ever forget about it afterward, but he left when he had done it.

How am I going to leave? I couldn’t take Jessie with me, working in sawmills and road camps. And what would happen if I left her here? He can’t work the crop by himself, even if he would, and you can’t live on grass.

“Go on,” he said, his face dark with passion. “If you’re going to do it, go on before she comes out here and sees you.”

Seven

“—one of the most intensive man hunts in the history of the state. As you will recall, Neely escaped three nights ago after wrecking the automobile in which he was being transported to the state penitentiary to begin serving a life sentence for armed robbery.

“There are several factors that go to make this one of the most sensational crime stories in this area in the past decade. One of these is the fact that it concerns Sewell, or Mad Dog, Neely, a gangster and hoodlum who has almost reached the stature of Public Enemy Number One, at least in this state. Last year, it will be recalled, he was on trial for the slaying of another hoodlum in a gang war between rival slot-machine syndicates, and he is alleged to have been involved in a number of brutal beatings in connection with the slot-machine rackets and their warring factions. He was acquitted of the murder charge, you will remember, when one of the state’s witnesses disappeared on the eve of the trial, probably as the result of threats and intimidation, authorities believe.

“And another sensational side of the case is, of course, the fact that it has not been three months since Neely was once before the object of a vast man hunt after a daring, singlehanded attempt to hold up an express company in broad daylight. In the ensuing gun battle a company guard was wounded and Neely fled in a stolen automobile, but not before he was recognized. Thus began a three-week chase across a dozen counties and a series of filling-station holdups that flared into the proportions of a one-man crime wave. Then he disappeared, dropping from sight completely for nearly two weeks, police believe somewhere in Houston. At any rate, there were no holdups during this period and Neely was not seen by anyone, and this when his picture was in every newspaper in the state and he would have been recognized almost anywhere. Then he was finally captured in a running gun battle with police some hundred miles north of Houston following a tip by a filling-station operator.

“And then there is, of course, the escape itself, marked by one of the most brutal crimes to occur in the state in a long time. Apparently Neely in some way managed to get hold of the steering wheel or slug the driver while the car was traveling at a high rate of speed and wrecked it, rolling it over and over down a steep embankment. The officer who was driving was instantly killed with a broken neck, but the other, to whom Neely was shackled, apparently survived, only to be murdered with his own gun. And this is the part of it that has horrified thousands and united the law-enforcement agencies of the whole state into one large armed posse determined to track Neely down and bring him to account at all costs. For, apparently unable to find the key to the handcuffs, he callously severed the hand of the dead officer to free himself of the encumbrance of his body.

“In the sixty hours since then, concerted efforts by law-enforcement agencies throughout the eastern half of the state have not unearthed a single clue as to his whereabouts. In a matter of hours after the discovery of the wrecked car and the bodies, road blocks were set up on every highway within a radius of a hundred miles. Railway and bus terminals were watched. There have been no holdups by anyone even remotely answering to his description. Dogs were brought up from a state prison farm to the scene of the wreck, but proved to be of no value, as Neely apparently took to the highway after leaving the car, and his trail became lost in the overpowering oily smells along the pavement. Police think it likely he was picked up in a car along the road somewhere, though intensive questioning of persons in adjacent towns has revealed nothing to substantiate this theory.

“It is not even known whether or not he was injured in the wreck, but it would appear that if he was not it was nothing short of miraculous in view of the way the automobile was demolished. Officers do know, however, that he was dressed in a blue serge suit and white shirt with no tie, tan shoes, and tan-colored tooled-leather cowboy belt with a silver buckle. He was not wearing a hat. And, of course, at the time of the escape he was still wearing the handcuffs attached to his right wrist. He’s armed, and all police officers have been cautioned that he is extremely dangerous.

“One interesting development has come to light in past few hours, however. This is the discovery of the key that Neely had been unable to find to free himself of the handcuffs. It was found in the mud near the car, where

it had apparently been thrown by Harvey Denham, the officer to whom Neely had been shackled. Officers state that the only possible way the key could have got there was for Denham, at the time he was shot or just before, have thrown it through the window of the car into the darkness to prevent Neely's escape, in a selfless act of heroism and devotion to duty that will be long remembered in the annals of law enforcement.

"At a late hour last night officers were still unable to understand how Neely could have evaded for this long the far-reaching dragnet set for him. They cited the fact that it is nearly impossible for a man whose description is as widely known as Neely's, and who is under the handicap of forever having to keep his right hand hidden because of the handcuffs, to travel anywhere without being recognized. They predicted that he would be picked up within hours.

"And now to the other news. In Washington last night? Senator Connally, Democrat, of Texas, said that in his opinion—"

Cass reached over and snapped the little button turned the light off. Had to be awful careful, the man had said, and not leave it turned on, because it would run the batteries down, especially since they didn't have any place to plug in the AC-DC. When the batteries were dead, the man said, they'd have to buy new ones. He wondered how they were going to do that. Oh, well, they'd cross that bridge when they came to it. Probably have the crop in then, with plenty of money to buy batteries. Wasn't much new. About the same as last night. Well, when there is something new, he thought, they'll put it n the air. Just got to be listening for it when it comes through. He rubbed the shiny blue leatherette case with a loving hand and thought how pretty it looked and tried to remember what the man had said was the full price, shouldn't have been too much, though, for the down payment was only ten dollars.

It was a hot, clear morning, with the sun just clearing the treetops along the crest of the ridge, and the red-gold rays splashing against the wall of the, front room reminded him of the bad time he'd had the past two days with miseries in his legs, and that a few more days of hot sunshine ought to bake it all out so he'd be able to get round.

He got up stiffly and hobbled out into the kitchen, where Jessie was putting breakfast on the table. She looked through him and went on pouring

Mitch's coffee. Mitch did not even bother to glance in his direction at all. Joy looked up and smiled.

"Good morning, Cass," she said.

Only one cares whether I live or die with the miseries is Joy, he thought, and she's just marrying kin. Ingratitude is sharper than the serpent's tooth, the Scripture lays. Only true child I got is Joy.

I hope the old cluck goes to work today so I can get a chance to turn on that radio and listen to some music, Joy thought. Way he watches it, you'd think we wanted to steal it. Must be me he's afraid'll get at it, because Mitch was down in the field from sunup to dark and he knows Jessie wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole.

"Sure feel stove up in the legs," Cass said wearily. "Just can't hardly get around at all."

No one answered him. Mitch went on eating. Jessie stood by the stove, impassive, still-faced, looking out the back door at the sunlight spilling into the yard.

"Was hoping I'd be able to get around today, we got so much to do, but I just don't know."

The silence continued, broken only by the popping of fire in the cookstove.

"Ain't found hide or hair of Sewell. They's a state-wide man hunt." He was beginning to parrot the cliches of the news broadcasts after nearly two days of listening to them.

Jessie put the plate of fried salt pork on the table and went out the back door, walking erect and rigid like an Indian down the single step into the yard.

"I wish she'd eat some breakfast," Cass said fretfully. "Ain't right for a youngun not have an appetite."

"When she gets hungry she'll eat," Mitch said. "Leave her alone."

"You ought to have more compassion for others. Jessie's your sister, same as Sewell's your brother, and you don't think about neither one of 'em. All you got time for is tearing into the crop like a man killing snakes. She ought to come and listen to the radio some. It'd get her in a better frame of mind."

"I wouldn't wait till she did," Mitch said.

"You think maybe she's still upset about the dawg?"

“No,” Mitch said coldly. “The dawg’s only been around here for about nine years, since she was six years old. And he’s been gone for two days now. She’s all over that.”

Cass was silent for a few minutes, then he asked, “You think maybe Sewell will get away from ‘em?”

“No,” Mitch said. “He won’t get away.”

“Well, they ain’t found no sign of him yet.”

“They will.”

“How can you say that?” Cass complained. “Don’t nobody know. He might.”

“Ain’t nobody can get away from ‘em when they want him bad enough.”

Cass sighed. “Well, it’s easy enough to say if you just don’t care, I reckon.”

Mitch pushed back his chair and got up.

“Sure wish I could get around,” Cass said plaintively, “It’s saddening to a man not to be able to do his part when there’s so much to be done.”

Mitch did not answer. He went on out into the back yard. Jessie was building a fire under the big soot-blackened washpot, fanning the blaze with an old straw hat to get it started.

Mitch stopped and looked down at her. “You ought to eat some breakfast.”

“I didn’t want any.”

“You ought to eat something anyway. It ain’t good for you, doing without.”

“I’m just not hungry, Mitch.”

“You’re going to be sick if you keep this up.”

“I’m all right.”

What can you tell her? he thought. He stood there for a moment looking down at her forlorn pretense of industry with the fire, wishing he could think of something to say that would help, and then he turned and strode down toward the barn.

Eight

Grass was something you could fight. It was an enemy you could see and touch and could come to grips with when the rain stood back and gave you a chance. It was waiting for you there in the cotton, long-leaved and rank and wet with the dew, sucking the food out of the ground and growing fat while it robbed you of your living. It was an arrogant enemy and hard to kill and there never seemed to be any end to it, but at least it was out in the open waiting for you, and when you slid the steel of the heel sweeps under it and turned it roots up to the burning anger of the sun it died and you had won a little something. There was nothing evasive about it and it was no will-o'-the-wisp you were chasing in the dark. It was rooted in the ground, as in a way you were rooted in it, and it would stand there and fight you for the ground and for survival, and when you brought your violence to it it didn't change shape on you and fade away like water slipping through your fingers.

You saw Sewell going away, and Jessie's sadness, and when you tried to fight it there was nothing you could hit. You tried to reason with Cass about the crop and about the dog and it was like chasing smoke with a minnow seine. There was nothing solid about any of it that you could get your hands on. You lay awake when you were dead tired and needed the sleep, lying there on the cot in the darkness thinking of hunting squirrels with Sewell and running the setlines at night along the river's banks with the pine torch blazing and sputtering and throwing your long-legged shadows against the trees, hunting coons with him to the baying of hounds on frosty, starlit winter nights a long time ago before he began to get in trouble, and all the other things you used to do with him and the way you always had to run to keep up with the endless vitality of him. You thought of him then and you thought of him now, and it was like a sickness eating at you from the inside where you couldn't get at it.

But with the crop, thank God, it was different. You could still lose because the rain could whip you and the boll weevils could whip you and any one of a half-dozen other things could do it too, but at least you were fighting something you could see and when you hit it you could feel something solid under your hand. It was an elemental problem, with nothing fancy about it. The crop was there, and if you didn't save it you went hungry. It had rained far too much already and there wasn't much chance now of that big crop you were always going to make next year, that fifteen bales or more when you would come out at the end of the year with money ahead and Jessie could go back to school and you could buy some of your own equipment again and not go on farming on the halves all your life. That was probably just a dream for another year. What you were fighting for now was survival. You had to pay off the credit to get credit for another year to go on eating to make another crop.

The cotton on the hillside fields wasn't going to amount to anything. It still looked bad. The color was all wrong, too pale and with too much yellow in it. If the rain held off and they could get the grass out of it, it would still take four acres of it to make a bale. He could see that as he went up and down the long, curving hillside rows with the cultivator, fighting to save what he could of it and waiting for the bottom ground to dry. The twenty-five acres in the bottom could still make ten or twelve bales if they could get in there to work it in time, but the grass was terrible in it and time was crowding them. It would be another two or three days before the ground would be dry enough to plow down there, and he watched the skies for signs of weather change as he fought the endless rows along the hill.

From sunup to sundown he urged the mules along with the slap of plowlines across their sweaty backs and the stinging lash of curses when they lagged. The halt at noon was a brief impatient moment of lost time while he bolted unnoticed food and went back out into the field before his sweat-drenched clothes had begun to dry. All day yesterday, today, and then tomorrow, and then another day, and the hillside would be plowed and the bottom dry so he could go on with the battle there in the field where the issue would be lost or won. He came in at night sweaty and sun-blackened and tired clear down to the bone, to eat supper by lamplight and pray for the weather to continue clear. Cass was a complaining voice at the head of the table, bemoaning the miseries in his legs that kept him from the field, and

full of the mounting tension of the hunt for Sewell. Jessie was a slender, still-face figure standing silently by the stove and waiting for Cass to leave the table before she would come and eat, and Joy was always there across from him, a blonde head under the lamplight and a hint of fragrance in the still, hot air of night, sliding the silken sheet of bitchery across the shackled and half-sleeping maleness in him while he hated her.

The next day was hot and clear, and then the next while he fought his way down the hillside and started out across the bottom, driving the mules and the cultivator ahead of him like a lank and bitter-faced avenging angel in pursuit of devils. Cass sat by the radio through the long hours drawn by the secret and magic ecstasy of hearing his name broadcast over the air, but they had not found Sewell. Neely has disappeared, the radio said, carrying his name into millions of homes along with Truman's and Stalin's.

Neely has disappeared into air.

* * *

In the long, bright afternoon Joy lay on her bed and tried to sleep. Jessie was ironing clothes in the kitchen and she could hear the rattle of irons on the cookstove and on beyond, in the front room, the droning voice of the radio where Cass waited for the news. It was hot in the room and she had taken off her dress and slip and lay there in the brief and fragmentary covering of her under-things with the door out into the kitchen partly open to catch any passing current of air. I hope Cass don't take a notion to go out in the kitchen, she thought. Oh, to hell with him. I'm not going to lie here and roast in a lot of clothes just because he might be snooping around. Let him look if he wants to. What the hell do I care?

She put an arm up across her face to shut out the light and the barren harshness of the room, but took it away in a minute because it was too hot to touch herself. There was no ceiling, and as she lay on her back with her bare arms and legs stretched out to keep from touching herself she could see the dusty rafters and the hot underside of the corrugated sheet-metal roofing fastened down to the lath with long nails that came through and splintered the wood. The walls were unpapered, constructed of rough one-by-twelves running vertically from floor to roof with battens nailed over the cracks on the outside. One of the battens had been torn off, and as the sun moved

down in the west a lengthening shaft of golden light came through the exposed crack and across the room. In the two hours she had been watching it she had seen it crawl across the old ironbound trunk against the wall and then onto the bed, and now it stretched across her thigh like a thin gold band. Her imitation-leather Gladstone bag lay open atop the trunk, and as she turned her head wearily in the heat she could see the shaft of light probing into the piled and disordered jumble of sleazy underthings and shoddy dresses with powder spilled over them, the bottle of cheap perfume, and her last pair of unsnagged nylons, and she wanted to scream.

She could feel the scream welling up from somewhere deep inside her like some bloating, nauseous pressure that had to escape somehow, and she put a hand across her mouth to hold it in. Oh, Christ, why can't I die and get it over with? Do I have to lie here in this goddamned heat and look at what I've got left to show for twenty-eight years? A paper suitcase full of cheap clothes a whore wouldn't be found dead in, and a cheap marriage to a cheap gangster, and before that a cheaper one to a cheap tout selling tip sheets to a bunch of cheap suckers at racetracks, and before that . . . But, Jesus Christ, what's the use in going any further back than that—to all the cheap, greasy hash houses and all the cheap bastards. Cheap! Cheap! Cheap! She put her hands up alongside her face to keep it from flying apart with the pounding repetition of the word through her brain.

Imagine trying to kid myself I'm only twenty-five and I that I look just the same as ever. That's a laugh. That's a hot one, all right! That's good. Jesus, but that's rich! With the lousy cold-blooded ape laughing right in my face in a stinking county jail like I was some slut asking him for a dollar. Twenty-eight years old and stranded without a nickel in a God-forsaken hole like this with everything I own in a paper suitcase, and beginning to droop like a share-cropper's wife who's had eleven brats and I'm trying to kid myself I've still got it and can go on from here. I couldn't get a job in a Congress Avenue burlesque show taking off my clothes for a bunch of bald-headed stew bums. Lying about my first husband connected with racing and the dances at the Roosevelt Hotel when the nearest ever got to the Roosevelt was tending bar in a broken-down beer joint while my precious husband bet the rent money on his own stupid tips out at the Fairgrounds. The glamorous Joyce Gavin Broussard Neely! I'm a cheap, lousy bitch who never had anything but looks, and now they're gone and I've got a paper

suitcase full of trashy clothes to show for it. For all twenty-eight years of it. Oh, God, if that ain't a scream!

She began to cry. Why do I go on trying to kid myself, looking in a mirror? I look like an old bag, and I know it. No woman ever knew whether she was beautiful or not by looking in a mirror. They don't tell you anything. Men tell you, not mirrors. And when they laugh in your face . . . Oh, Jesus, I wish I could die.

Her shoulders shook with the crying and she turned wretchedly on her side and gave way to the storm of self-pity. In a moment, however, she became aware there, was someone else in the room and looked up through the tears to see Jessie standing inside the door and watching her with anxiety.

"Joy, what is it?" Jessie asked. "Are you all right?"

Joy choked down the sobs and drew a hand across her eyes. She nodded dumbly. Jessie went over to the suitcase and found a handkerchief and took it to her, feeling shy and self-conscious because of her nakedness and looking only at her face. Joy reached for it and dabbed forlornly at her eyes.

"What is it, Joy?" Jessie asked again. "Can I help?" She stood very straight beside the bed, like a grave-eyed and worried child being introduced for the first time to the sickbed and the ills of adults.

"I—I got to thinking about Sewell," Joy said. Well, in a way I was, she thought defensively. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess, honey."

"Poor Joy," Jessie said, her own eyes beginning to grow misty. "I'm sorry, Joy."

Joy began to cry again and Jessie sat down on the side of the bed with her back toward the foot because she was still embarrassed about the other's almost nude body. She shyly placed a hand on her head and Joy moved convulsively toward her and threw an arm across her lap while she shook with sobs and pressed her face into the bed.

"Oh, Jessie, I'm so alone," she wailed. "I haven't got anybody and I'm not pretty any more and I'm such a mess."

Nine

Jessie stroked her head soothingly. "Joy! That's no way to talk. You know it's not so. You've got us. And I don't know anybody as pretty as you are."

"You don't have to say that, honey," Joy said miserably. "It's sweet of you to try to cheer me up, but you don't have to say things like that."

"But I mean it, Joy."

Maybe she does, at that, Joy thought. She's a funny kid. She wouldn't lie to a bear that was going to eat her.

"You've got to quit worrying so much about Sewell," Jessie went on. "I know how it tears you up, but it can't help things to worry about it. Now, you just wait here a minute."

Maybe fixing herself up would take her mind off things, she thought. She went out in the kitchen and returned in a moment with a basin of water and a washcloth. "Now, Joy, you sponge your face off and I'll get your purse for you. And while you're fixing up I'm going to iron a dress for you. Not pretty! The idea!"

Joy sat up and began washing away the tear streaks. Jessie set the basin down carefully beside her on the bed and went over to the suitcase again for her purse.

"Which dress would you like pressed?" she asked.

"They're all a mess," Joy said dully. "They're terrible."

"They're not, either. You have the prettiest things. How about this print one you haven't worn?"

Joy nodded listlessly. "All right."

She went on sponging her face. The water was cool and it made her face feel better, and without too much interest at first she bathed her eyes to take away the redness and puffiness of crying. Jessie came back in a minute with a towel and she rubbed her face dry and began combing her hair. This improved her spirits, as it always did, for she loved the feel of running the comb through it and shaking it back until the ends just touched her

shoulders. But it was the honest admiration in Jessie's eyes that did the most for her.

Jessie came in carrying the dress she had ironed. She smiled and held it out at arm's length, admiring it. "Are you ready for it, Joy? Can I get you a slip?"

"It's too hot to wear a slip, honey," Joy said. She wiggled up through the dress, mussing her hair a little. It was a short-sleeved dress with big bows on the shoulders. "Do you want to tie the bows?"

"Do you think I could do it right?" Jessie asked eagerly.

"Of course you can, baby. It's just a bowknot." She sat still on the bed while Jessie tied them, making the bows large and fluffy. Then she started combing her hair again.

"Would you be an angel, honey, and bring me the mirror? The one on the back porch."

Jessie brought the mirror and held it for her while she finished with her hair and made up her face. She studied her reflection appraisingly. Her hair looked nice, coming down in a long golden sweep across the tops of the blue bows riding so jauntily on her shoulders, and her eyes showed very little aftereffect of the crying.

"You look so wonderful,"-Jessie said. It made her feel good to be doing something for Joy and it helped to take her mind off the awful thing Sewell had done.

"Do you really think so, honey?" Joy asked. She tilted her head back a little and narrowed her eyes. What am I afraid of? she thought. I can see I haven't changed any. But the minute I put the mirror away I start getting scared again. Look at the moon-eyed way the kid watches me. She thinks I look wonderful and says so, but somehow it's not the same as a man saying it. Why does it always have to be a man? But they'd still turn and look at me. I know they would. I get scared too easy, that's all, just because I'm broke and down on my luck. And just because that stupid, cold-blooded gorilla laughed at me, and that dumb, stuck-up Mitch pretends he don't even see me. You'd think there wasn't any other men. What about Harve? And that photographer? Oh, I could show that Mitch, all right. But, for God's sake, why do I care? What do I want him following me around for? I wouldn't have him on a bet. God, you'd think he was Gable, the way I stew about it. The lousy share-cropper, what do I want him looking at me for? If

I was one of those women that just has to have one in bed with her all the time it'd be different and I could understand it maybe, but I'm not like that. I don't care anything about that, one way or the other. They muss you up so, especially the wild ones like that damn Sewell.

I know what's the matter with that Mitch. He's just afraid of me, that's all. Trying to pretend like I'm an old bag that nobody'd want, and he's just afraid of me. I could twist him around my finger any time I wanted to. And I'll do it, too.

"My, but you look pretty," Jessie was saying. "Don't you feel better now?"

Joy smiled. "Honey, I feel like a new woman."

Ten

Cass had left the supper table. Jessie sat down with a plate of peas and some corn bread and went through the motions of eating, paying less and less attention to the food until at last she stopped altogether without even knowing it. It was dark outside now but still very hot in the kitchen. A gray moth fluttered its death dance about the lamp chimney, making a rustling sound with its wings, and down in the bottom they could hear the whippoorwills beginning to call. Mitch looked up from his plate to see Joy watching him.

“How are you getting along with the plowing, Mitch?” she asked.

“Oh. All right,” he said, surprised. It was the first time she had ever asked about the crop, or indicated she even knew they had one. She had on a dress with some kind of big bowknots on the shoulders that came up under the golden waterfall of her hair and made her look like a movie actress or a girl on the cover of a magazine.

“Do you think you’ll get caught up with it?” she asked. She leaned her elbows on the oilcloth and put her chin on her hands and watched him with flattering attention.

“If it don’t rain no more, maybe,” he said. She was very beautiful to look at whether he liked her or not, and he felt the anger in him now that she could disturb him.

“Isn’t he going to help you any more?” Jessie asked.

“I don’t know,” Mitch said. He would never ask help of a man who needed asking.

“Has he really got rheumatism, or is it just the radio that cripples him up?” Joy asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered shortly.

He did know, or was reasonably sure he did, but felt it was a family matter and none of her business. Cass was nothing any more but the wreckage of a man, but he did not want to talk about it to an outsider.

“Well, it’s not fair,” Jessie protested.

“Don’t make no difference,” Mitch shrugged. “All I want is clear weather. I can handle it if it don’t rain no more.”

“What if it starts in again?” Joy asked.

“We’ll lose it,” he said curtly. He didn’t like to think about the rain’s starling again.

Jessie began to scrape up the dishes. He got up and went outside to smoke a cigarette, hoping it would be a little cooler in the yard. Before Cass had brought home the radio he would go sit on the front porch at night for a smoke before going to bed, but now he would not go near it. The sound of the radio’s incessant jabbering came through the open front window and the door and there was no escape from it on the porch. The thought of Sewell was hard enough to bear without hearing the whole brutal mess turned into a circus for the hundreds of thousands who had nothing better to do than listen like ghouls for the sordid and shameful end of a man who could have been something different. And the thought of Cass in there in the dark keeping his macabre vigil before the idiot mouthings of the detested box and waiting along with all the others for the inevitable destruction of his son was a thing to be avoided, and he kept away from it.

He wandered down by the barn and leaned against the rails of the mule lot. There was no moon, but the sky was aflame with stars and he could make out the faintly sway-backed silhouette of Julie standing beyond him by the gate and the solid black mass of Jack lying in the dust where he had rolled. The other two were inside the barn and he could hear the sibilant rasping of their muzzles against the bottom of the feed trough as they searched out random grains of corn left over from their feeding, and when one of them kicked the ground he could hear the thudding impact across the night.

He finished the cigarette and dropped it, grinding out the red coal in the dirt with the toe of his shoe. There was the sound of soft footsteps on the sand behind him and he turned, thinking it was Jessie. The figure was taller than Jessie’s, though, and in the starlight he could see the faintly gleaming cascade of soft blonde hair.

“Is that you, Mitch?” she asked softly. “I thought I saw a cigarette.”

“Yes,” he said. Why couldn’t she stay in the house where she belonged?

“I think I can see you now. My eyes are getting used to the dark.” She came toward him and put out a hand, feeling for the rails of the fence. The hand brushed gently along his arm. “Oh. There you are. I didn’t mean to bump into you.”

He said nothing. She leaned against the rail. “It’s so hot in the house.”

“It ain’t very cool anywhere,” he said.

“It’s a little better out here, though. Don’t you think? And it’s such a beautiful night. I want to look at the stars. Do you know the name of any of them, Milch?”

“No. Only the North Star.”

“Do you know how to locate it? I never can remember.”

“You sight along the two pointers on the Big Dipper.”

“Isn’t it silly? I can’t even find that. Will you point it out for me, Mitch?”

She was standing very near, and he could smell the faint fragrance of the perfume she used. There was a tight band pulling across his chest and he knew if he tried to talk his voice would be thick and unnatural. He said nothing, and swung an arm toward the north, pointing just above the dark line of the trees around the clearing.

“I don’t see it,” she said. “I can’t see where you’re pointing. But wait, Mitch. I’ll sight along your arm.”

She moved in very close to him, with the top of her head just under his chin, and turned her face the way he was pointing. One hand came up and rested lightly on his shoulder to steady herself. Stray tendrils of hair brushed against his throat. Then she tilted her head back and looked up at him with her eyes very wide and the stars reflected in them.

“Why don’t you like me, Mitch?” she asked softly.

Blood roared in his ears, the way it did when he held his breath too long, swimming underwater, and the weight on his chest was choking him. All the hard ache of all the womanless nights boiled down to a concentration of agony on a pin point of time, this brief and exploding moment out of all time and beyond which nothing mattered. He would have to move his arms so little to possess the end of torment, the sweet and silken oblivion, the dark, wild ecstasy, and at last relief. His arms hurt and his hands were heavy as he moved them. They shook as he put them on her waist, and he could feel the smoothness of her there just beyond the flimsy cloth. He brought

them on up with a rush, placed them against her shoulders, and shoved. She shot backward, tripped over a high heel in the sand, and fell sprawling with a pale flash of bare arms and legs in the starlight.

Dry air burned in his throat and his mouth tasted coppery as he stood breathing heavily and looking down at her.

“Can’t you even wait till they kill him?” he asked savagely. Then he turned and walked down the black trail beyond the barn, not knowing or caring which way he went.

She lay crumpled on her side like a long-stemmed and wilted flower with her hair and the side of her face in the dirt. Her dress had flown up about her waist when she fell and she could feel the gritty abrasiveness of sand under her sprawled bare legs, and when she clenched her mouth tightly shut to keep from screaming she could taste the sand and hear the gritty sound of it between her teeth. She rolled her head from side to side in a sickening agony of rage and shame and humiliation, and she put her hand up against her mouth and bit it until she tasted blood while she gave birth to the second great passion of her life. The first had always been love of herself, and the second was hatred of Mitch Neely.

Eleven

In the middle of the afternoon he went out and looked at the river again. It was the third time that day, and now he stood by the old ford where he and Sewell had kept their rowboat tied up and stood watching it with a strange uneasiness. It was too high for this time of year.

There had been no rain for nearly a week and it should have been dropping toward midsummer level and clearing, but instead it was higher than it had been during the rain and had risen another inch since noon. He stood watching it slip past, silt-laden and flecked with foam, critically assaying the amount and size of drift it was carrying. It was still rising, all right.

He had seen it do that twice in his life, keep coming up when there had been no rain, raised by heavy downpours somewhere far upriver, and the last time had been seven years ago when it had almost flooded the bottom fields, the year Sewell had gone away.

He turned and went back out toward the field and looked up at the sky when he got out of the timber. There was something disquieting and strangely uneasy about the whole day. It was too still, for one thing, and sultry, with an oppressive deadness about the air that worried him. It reminded him of the tense and foreboding hush that falls over a group of men when there is about to be a fight. But there were no clouds. The sky was clear and it was perfectly normal weather for late June except for the oppressive stillness.

He was plowing out the middles. Yesterday, he had finished with the cultivator and the field looked much better than it had. He looked with satisfaction at the grass dying in the hot sun. May save it now, he thought. There's still a lot of grass in the rows that couldn't be out except by hoeing it again, and it'll be hard to but it'll make some cotton. Unless it rains some more, or that river gets on a tear. It ain't nothing to worry about unless it

gets up a lot more than it is now, but somehow I just don't like the looks of it.

* * *

Up at the house Cass was asleep, with the radio turned off for a short spell to rest the batteries, and Joy was walking up and down in the stifling, dead heat of the bedroom, running her fingers through her hair and pausing now and then to dab at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"I—I just don't know what to do, Jessie," she said. "It scares me. I guess it's silly to get scared now, but I just don't know what to do. Suppose he does it again?"

Jessie sat on the bed and looked at her sister-in-law with her eyes large and worried. "But, Joy," she protested unhappily, "he wouldn't. I just can't think he'd do a thing like that, even once. Not Mitch."

"I know, honey," Joy went on agonizingly. "That's the awful part of it. That's the reason I didn't want to say anything about it. He's your brother, and I know you think the world of him. I wouldn't have said anything about it for anything in the world, because I knew how unhappy it would make you. But since you practically caught him at it, there wasn't any way I could keep you from knowing any longer. If you hadn't come out there just then, when I was lying there on the ground where I'd fallen, there's no telling what might have happened. He heard you, and that scared him, I guess."

"I never did say anything about the other times and I wouldn't have this time because, like I said, you're so young and he's your brother, but since you saw it, or part of it—well, you just couldn't help knowing about it any longer. I tried to get away from him, and I always had been able to before, but this time I tripped when I moved back, and fell. Oh, it was awful."

"It isn't that I blame him so much, Jessie. You have to learn to make allowances for men. They can't help being like that, I guess. And when a girl is pretty . . . I guess I still am, a little bit anyway, even if I am getting old and don't look like I used to. But what I mean is you can't blame them so much. But still, his own *sister-in-law*. I mean, I *am* married to Sewell, and poor Sewell is in such trouble. But please don't misunderstand me, honey. I'm not mad about it or anything, it's just that it scares me somehow. What am I going to do, Jessie? What *am* I going to do?"

She threw herself on her own bed, across from Jessie's, and put her hands up alongside her face with her fingers reaching up into the golden disarray of her hair, but she was unable to sit still for more than a few seconds and got up and started walking up and down again. Oh, the ugly, stupid, mean-faced sonofabitch, she thought. I could tear his eyes out. I could kill him. Oh, God, I hate him so much it makes my stomach turn over to think about it and I get sick. I'll throw up right here on the floor if I don't stop thinking about it. I've got to stop. It was almost two days ago and I haven't stopped thinking about it one minute since then, and I'm going out of my mind. I'm beginning to look like some blowzy old bag who's been drunk for a week, with my hair a mess and still full of sand and my eyes red from lying awake and from crying, and I can't eat anything because my stomach turns wrong side out every time I see him and it's all I can do to sit down at the table without wanting to pick up everything on it and throw it in his face and beat on it, and beat, and beat, and beat.

The thing that kills me is that I wouldn't have had him for a door prize. I wouldn't have had him on a bet. You couldn't have given him to me. No woman in her right mind would even look at him, the ugly, skinny, sweaty, dirty, mean-faced, ignorant bastard with whiskers all over his face and that hideous butter-colored hair stuck down to his head with sweat and those hard little eyes pushed way back in his head like a couple of cold pieces of rock, and he thinks I wanted *him*. That *I* did! Oh, my God! And he *shoved* me.

"Try not to think about it, Joy," Jessie said, feeling sick at heart. How *could* Mitch? How could he do such an awful thing? It just wasn't like Mitch. But still, she had seen it with her own eyes, seen Joy lying there with her head in the sand where she had fallen.

"I am trying not to, honey," Joy said. "I don't like to cause a lot of fuss over something that probably isn't anything, really. I mean, lots of girls have had to fight off men who lose their heads like that. I've had to do it before myself, but never— I mean—Well, you know, my own *brother-in-law*."

She broke off and smiled wanly at Jessie. "I don't want you to think I'm such a baby, honey," she added.

"I don't, Joy. I think you're wonderful. And I'll give that Mitch a piece of my mind he won't forget."

“Oh, no, honey,” Joy broke in piteously. “No, don’t do that, whatever you do. Don’t ever mention it to anybody. I wouldn’t ever want to think I’d caused any hard feelings between you and Mitch. I know how much you think of each other, and I know how much Mitch adores you. I couldn’t stand it if I thought I’d done that.”

She’s so sweet, Jessie thought. I hope I can be like that when I grow up. She’s so sort of brave, like women in the movies. I don’t know how Mitch could have done an awful thing like that.

Joy stopped at the window and stood looking out into the yard. “I ought to leave, honey,” she said sadly. “That’s what I ought to do. After all, this is Mitch’s home and I don’t belong here, and if there’s going to be trouble like that I should go. I would, too, even though I’d hate to leave you, we’ve been such good friends and it’s all been so nice except—except, well, for that. Only, there’s something I haven’t told you.”

She turned back from the window, her eyes shining with tears. “I haven’t got any money left, honey. I would have gone except for that. I gave all I had left to poor Sewell, to buy tobacco with, and magazines, and things he’d need up—up there.” Her chin quivered and her face threatened to break up into helpless crying, but she recovered herself bravely and went on.

“I didn’t want to tell you that because it’s so—so humiliating being dependent, sort of, even though I know you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind! Joy, what a thing to say! You know we love having you here,” Jessie broke in, outraged.

Joy smiled at her bravely. “I know you do, honey. That all of you do. And I don’t think that it had anything to do with Mitch doing—well, you know. I mean, I don’t think he really intended to take advantage of the fact that I was kind of dependent on you. I hope not, don’t you, dear? But what I meant to say was that I wrote to a friend of mine who lives in Houston, a girl named Dorothy who is a model in one of the big stores. We used to work together as models. Anyway, I wrote to her yesterday and asked her if she would lend me some money so I could come down there and look for a job. If the money comes I’ll go, but that may be several days, because I just mailed it yesterday.

“Until it comes, if it does, maybe we’d better kind of stick together, I mean when he’s around. With the two of us together he won’t be so apt to—

well, be carried away like that. I mean, you're his sister, honey, and he has too much respect for you to try anything like that in front of you. I'm sure he has. Nearly any man would. Oh, honey, I hate to be such a big baby, but I'm so scared. It wouldn't be so much, by itself, but what with not having any money and being sort of dependent, and worrying about Sewell and wondering where he is . . ."

* * *

Mitch came up from the barn at dusk. Jessie was putting supper on the table, and as he sat down she glanced at him distantly and said nothing.

"What've we got, Jessie?" he asked. "I'm hungry."

"Why don't you look?" she asked coldly, putting a plate in front of Joy.

Now what's eating her? Mitch thought, and then forgot about it while his mind went back to the river. It had still been rising a little when he knocked off in the field at sundown.

"Still ain't no news about Sewell," Cass said, after he had hobbled painfully in from the front room.

"Poor Sewell," Joy said sadly. "It's so tragic."

She picked a hell of a time to find out how tragic it is about poor Sewell, Mitch thought. Where's she been the past three years?

"You and Sewell were always very close, weren't you, Mitch? I mean, before he went away. You must think about him a lot." She smiled wanly at him, and he saw Jessie look toward him once and then quickly away.

It must have just come over her all at once, like something out of the sky, that everything ain't just exactly all right with Sewell, he thought. Well, better late than never, I reckon. But what the hell's the matter with Jessie?

When he had finished eating, he went out into the darkness of the yard to smoke a cigarette, and suddenly heard the far-off rumble of thunder in the west. The air was still and oppressively hot, like that in a tightly closed room with the windows sealed. God, he thought, not with that river already up like it is now.

Jessie was starting to wash the dishes. Joy went over and looked in the water bucket and saw with inner satisfaction that it was almost empty. "I'll get some more water, Jessie," she said helpfully. "You'll need some more for rinsing."

Jessie shook her head. "No, you leave it alone, Joy," she said. "Mitch will bring some."

"Oh, I want to help," Joy said, going toward the door.

Jessie looked at her anxiously, nodding toward the yard. But Joy smiled, shook her head deprecatingly, and went on.

Mitch had his back turned and was looking out over the bottom as she went down toward the well. She drew up a bucket and filled the cedar water pail and started back, walking slowly and watching him standing there just beyond the light streaming from the kitchen door.

He saw her. "Here, I'll take that," he said gruffly. If she wanted to do something, why didn't she help Jessie with the dishes?

"It's all right, Mitch," she said, and then suddenly set the water down and bent forward, holding a hand on her back just above the hip.

"What is it?" he asked, stepping quickly to her side.

"I—I think just a catch in my back," she said faintly, still bent over as if in pain. "Can you stand up?" he asked. He took hold of her arm.

She cried out sharply, the sound cutting across the night, and swayed as if she would fall. He caught her, and as they were blended into one figure in the edge of the light for an instant she could see Jessie standing in the door, drawn by her outcry. She pushed him back violently with her hands, scooped up the bucket, and ran toward the door.

Twelve

Sewell Neely hopped off the freight as it was coming into the yards at Houston and walked across the acres of tracks in the dark. It had been almost twenty-four hours now since he had come up out of the river bottom onto the highway. He had caught a freight coming through the bottom shortly after he had crossed the highway bridge, and had ridden it until daybreak. Then he had left it and hidden out all during the day under an abandoned farmhouse. Sometime after nightfall he had been able to board another.

He had on a raincoat he had stolen from a helpless and passed-out drunk in a boxcar. With the coat buttoned up to hide the ruin of his clothing and his hand in the pocket to keep the handcuff out of sight, he could get by as long as he kept moving and no one got a second look at him. I might be any bum unloading from a freight, he thought, unless somebody gets a good look at my face in the light. It's probably in every paper in the state.

It was a long walk, keeping to side streets and away from lighted areas. I hope she's home, he thought. If she's still working the four-to-midnight, she ought to be. Unless she's got a date. Probably not, though. She's a funny one. Guys coming in to eat, trying to date her up all the time, and she brushes them off.

It was upstairs over a motorcycle salesroom in a rundown neighborhood. There was a drugstore, still open, on the corner. A prowler car slipped past, cruising, and he could feel the tingling along his spine and the tightening of the skin across the back of his neck like a dog's hackles rising. I can feel 'em, he thought. If I live long enough, I'll be able to smell 'em, like a wolf. If one went by in the dark while I was asleep I'd wake up and growl.

The sign said, "Hskpg. Rms. & Apts." There was a, dark stairway going up, and the hallway at the top was dimly lit with two small unshaded bulbs, one at each end. The first door was marked "Mgr." and there was a bell, with a printed cardboard sign, the kind they sold in dime stores, saying.

“Ring for Manager,” stuck on the plaster above it with Scotch tape. There was no one in the hall and he walked down the center of it, going softly like a big cougar on the worn carpet, smelling the odor of ancient dust and stale cooking that always clung to places like this.

It’s going to be rough if she’s not at home, he thought. I can’t stand around here in the hall at one o’clock in the morning. Or if she’s moved and somebody else answers the door. Sorry to wake you up, Jack, but I’m looking for a girl named Dorothy, and don’t look at my face, you might recognize me. I think the reason they always catch you in the end is that they wear you out. They get you tired. They work in shifts and you work all the time, and when you get a chance to go to sleep your nerves are still working. Well, if you want to take a vacation you can always go and give yourself up. They always got the welcome sign out for cop-killers. Take a long rest in the back room with the light in your eyes.

It was the last apartment on the right. There was a crack of light under the door and he could hear, very faintly, the sound of music. It sounds like Dorothy, he thought. She does that. It’s against the rules to play a radio after ten-thirty, but she always does, turning it way down and getting up close to it to listen.

He knocked softly and waited. There was no answer. He rapped on the door again, a little louder. There was the sound of someone moving, and a girl’s voice on the other side of the door said, “Who is it?”

“Lufkin,” he said. He had first met her in Lufkin when she worked in, a restaurant there and he was working in a sawmill. It was a long time ago, before he got in trouble with the law the first time, but she would know who it was.

The door opened and he stepped inside quickly and she shut it. Nothing had changed in the apartment. It was one room, with a window looking out into the alley, but the shade was pulled now. On the right there was a door going into the tiny kitchen, and on the other side there was a bathroom door, closed now, and the bed was on that side, a cheap iron bedstead with the enamel flaking off. On the right side of the room, between the closet and the kitchen door, there was an old velvet-upholstered sofa with sagging springs and the nap worn off the cushions. At the head of the bed, by the window, there was a little table with a dime-store lamp on it, and the cheap AC-DC radio in its white plastic case, the case broken and patched with Scotch tape.

Late at night after she had come home from work she would sit on the bed with her face close to the radio and listen to it, to the music of the dance bands in big hotels across the country.

She was always very quiet, and now she stood back from him without saying anything. There was something about her that always made him think of an Indian, perhaps the quietness and the tall, straight way she stood. She was almost five feet nine and very slender, but she never slouched the way some tall girls did. Her hair was black and very straight, like an Indian's, and she wore it in a long turned-under bob down on her shoulders. She had very dark brown eyes that looked black at night. He had slept with her a lot of times, mostly when he was hiding out from the police, and always afterward, for a little while, he would remember the funny way she had of lying very close to him, her face near his on the pillow and her eyes wide open, watching him and not saying anything. Her eyes would be very big then, and still, while she lay there just touching him somewhere and looking at him. She was a funny one, all right.

"Hello, Dorothy," he said. He put his left arm across her shoulders and moved to kiss her, but she drew back slightly.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Ain't you glad to see me?"

"Let me have your coat," she said. "I'll hang it up."

He took it off and the handcuff swung, the polished steel shining in the light. She looked at it once, and then quickly away. She took the coat and went into the bathroom with it to let it drip in the tub.

He sat down on the sofa. There was a package of cigarettes on the little coffee table in front of it, and he picked it up, the handcuff dragging across the wood. "Does it bother you?" he asked.

She sat down on the bed across from him, with her hands in her lap.

"Don't pay no attention to it," he said indifferently, lighting the cigarette. "He was dead anyway, and a hand more or less one way or the other didn't make no difference to him."

"I just don't want to look at it," she said, her face white. "Do you have to talk about it? What are you going to do now, with the whole state looking for you?"

"Stay here, till some of the heat cools down and I get shut of this thing and get some new clothes. Then I'll try to get out of the state." It ain't going to be easy, he thought.

She saw the long jagged tear in his coat sleeve and the pink-stained tatters of the shirt showing through. "You've been hurt."

"Just cut it on some glass," he said indifferently. "No use to do anything about it now."

"But it might get infected," she said anxiously. "We ought to fix it up."

"I never get infected."

"Have you had anything to eat?" she asked.

"Not since yesterday. Day before yesterday now."

"There's some ham in the icebox. I'll fix you something." She started to get up.

He looked at her. "It can wait. We can have breakfast in the morning. We better go to bed. It's late."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Yes." He grinned. "But not that hungry."

"I'd better fix you something."

He saw she was determined, and got up and followed her into the kitchen. There was a sink, a small icebox and a two-burner gas stove. He sat down at the table while she got the sliced ham out of the box and made two sandwiches and put them on a plate in front of him. She poured a glass of milk and sat down across from him.

"Who lives in there now?" he asked, nodding his head toward the next apartment. They had to be careful about making too much noise talking.

"It's all right," she said. "It's vacant. There was a girl there, by herself. I think she was a hustler, because she brought a lot of different men in. About a week ago she brought in some drunk and made a lot of noise and the manager called the police and they took her away."

After he had finished the sandwiches and milk they went back in the other room. He sat down on the sofa and she went back to the bed and sat there, watching him while he smoked another cigarette. Her eyes still avoided the handcuff.

She was even more silent than usual. The other times she would talk more, and smile now and then, and when she looked at him her eyes would be soft and happy, but now they were dead.

She had taken off her dress and stockings when she came home from work, and had on a blue cotton kimono or dressing gown or something of the sort that came open at the knees when she crossed her legs. She had nice

legs, long and very smooth, and he looked at them, remembering the long time he had been in jail. She saw the glance and pulled the kimono together across them, looking away from him and blushing.

"The first thing I'll need in the morning is a hack saw," he said. "And a little vise. I can work on this handcuff during the day while they're tuning up them damn motorcycles down there. Nobody'll hear the sawing." He wasn't thinking about the handcuff now, though. He was thinking about being in bed with her, remembering the smooth, warm feel of her in the dark and all the eager, responsive passion.

"You remember how the motorcycles used to wake us" up in the mornings?" he went on. "When we slept late and how we would lie there in bed not having to worry about anybody hearing us because they made so much noise?"

She made no reply to that. In a minute she asked, "Where do you get hack saws?"

"In hardware stores. But you can get little ones at the dime store, in the tool department. They break, but you can get spare blades. They ain't as good as the regular ones, but it'll be safer that way. Nobody'll see you carrying it in."

"And you want a little vise, too?"

"Yes. You may have to get that in a hardware store. Just a small one. The cheapest one they have. One you can clamp onto a table."

"All right. I'll get them in the morning."

"We'd better go to bed now," he said. To hell with all this stalling around, he thought. All that can wait till tomorrow.

She got up. "You can sleep here on the bed," she said, as if she had been waiting for and dreading this moment. "I'll take the sofa."

He ground out the cigarette in the ash tray and stared at her. "What the hell, sleep on the couch?" he demanded. "Since when? We'll sleep in the bed. Both of us."

"No," she said.

"What do you mean, no? What's the matter with you?"

She stood and stared back at him as if he were a long way off. "Nothing."

"Well, where do you get this couch stuff?"

“Do you have to ask so many questions? Can’t you be reasonable about it?”

“Well, of all the silly damn— Oh, it’s that? Just my rotten luck. Of all the times to get here. But, Christ, why didn’t you just say so?”

“No. That’s not it.”

“Well, for God’s sake, what is it?” She had a perfect out, he thought, but she wouldn’t lie about anything. She’s a funny duck, all right. “Have you caught something?”

”No,” she said coldly.

“Well, what’s the trouble?”

“I just don’t want to do it.” Her eyes were miserable, but she looked straight at him.

He went around the table and moved to put his arm around her. She backed away from him, the way she had before.

“Come on now, baby.”

“No,” she said. “I mean it, Sewell. No.”

He began to grow angry. “If there’s anything on earth crazier than a damned woman— I ought to clout you one.”

“I suppose you could beat me up. But it would make a lot of noise.”

“Oh, don’t be a damn fool. I’m not going to beat you up.” He sat down on the sofa again. “Pitch me one of those pillows. I’ll sleep here if you’re going to be that pigheaded about it.”

“You’re so big. You ought to take the bed.”

“To hell with the bed.”

He punched the pillow angrily and stuffed it under his head. His legs stuck out over the armrest on the other end of the sofa.

She got her nightgown out of the closet and went into the bathroom with it. She kept her face turned away, but her shoulders were shaking and he knew she was crying. In a little while she came out, with the kimono on over the nightgown. She turned the light out and he heard her take off the kimono and get into bed.

Thirteen

Above the rasp, rasp, rasp of the hack saw he looked at her. It was afternoon and she was sitting on the bed dressed to go to work at three-thirty. She would not look at the handcuff clamped in the vise on the table.

“So you ain’t seen anything of her at all?” he asked, sighting at the groove he had sawed. It was slow work and he had already broken a dozen blades.

“No.” Dorothy shook her head.

“Any letter from her?” he asked with elaborate casualness. If anybody’s heard from the bitch and knows where she is, he thought, it’d be Dorothy.

She shook her head again. He comes and lives with me, hiding out, when the police are after him, she thought, but all he wants to do is get back to that blonde slut who’s left him three times already when he was in trouble. And I was the one who introduced him to her when we were working together in the restaurant in Beaumont. I wish I had died first. It would have been better for him, too. God knows he could get into enough trouble by himself, but she sure didn’t help matters any, after him for money all the time.

It was all right that other time when he was here, and at least I had that, and the other times before I introduced him to her, but now there isn’t anything. I wish I could be like I was before, and go with him, because he does want to so much, but if you can’t, you just can’t. Every time I see that handcuff I feel sick in my stomach. If he put that hand on me the way he used to I couldn’t help myself and I’d throw up. If only there could have been just once more. Just once more, knowing it was the last, so you could remember every little thing for all the rest of the time.

She stood up. “I’ve got to go to work,” she said dully. “You won’t go out anywhere, will you?”

He looked up from his sawing. “What the hell, you think I’m crazy?”

“I’ll be back around midnight. The restaurant’s not very far from here.” She moved toward the door.

“All right,” he said indifferently.

Rasp, rasp, rasp, the hack saw sang, lost under the muffled thunderings of motorcycles being tuned. When there was silence from below, he stopped and waited, smoking a cigarette and thinking.

“Look at this, Mad Dog,” Harve had said, holding the picture up between the bars. “This babe is stacked, huh? Of course, you’ve probably seen better, being a big shot and getting around the way you do, but us old country boys up here in the sticks always appreciate anything that comes our way, especially when it’s nice and obliging like this. Thought you might have seen her, maybe. She comes from your part of the country, down on the coast.”

Well, Harve was a good man with his little jokes, he thought, looking at the empty half of the handcuff, but he sure didn’t show much judgment there at the end, putting me in that car with only one hand shackled. Maybe he’s lonesome now and waiting for her. And maybe I can help him out before they get me. If I can find her.

Late in the afternoon he had the handcuff off. He rolled it in an old newspaper and threw it under the bed. Dorothy could get rid of it some way after he was gone. Picking up the razor she had bought for him, he went into the bathroom and shaved. After that, he took a bath and put on the new clothes she had bought. The trousers of the brown suit were too large around the waist, but he pulled them in with the belt.

Now I’m all dressed up, he thought, and got nowhere to go. I don’t dare take a chance on going out of here for another three or four days. In the meantime, there’s nothing to do but listen to the radio and look at the papers to see if any of ‘em mention where my loving wife is.

When Dorothy came home about twelve-fifteen, he was asleep on the bed. She lay down on the couch, without disturbing him.

In the morning he had another idea. “Go out to a pay phone somewhere,” he said. He handed her the telephone number written out on a piece of paper. “Get long-distance and put in a call to our apartment. If you get her, ask her how she is and the usual stuff, but don’t say anything about me at all. The phone may be tapped.”

“All right,” she said lifelessly.

She came back in about fifteen minutes and shook her head at his questioning glance. "There's some other people living in the apartment now."

Then she hasn't been home at all, he thought. If she'd gone back she could probably have kept the apartment, by laying the landlord or selling her pictures. There ought to be a big demand for her pictures, he thought coldly.

"What are you going to do now?" Dorothy asked him the morning of the third day.

"Try to get out of the state, if I can make it. That is, if I can't locate her."

"When?"

"In another day or so. Why? You in a hurry for me to leave?" he asked suspiciously.

"No," she said. "You can stay as long as you want."

"I'll pay you back for what you've spent," he said angrily, "if the money's bothering you."

"I don't care anything about the money."

"You don't care about anything, do you? I never thought I'd see the time I could be here three days and never even get to touch you."

"I didn't either," she said, looking at the floor.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"I don't know. Nothing seems to make any difference."

It was hot in the apartment during the day, almost unbearably hot with the door and the windows closed. Restlessness had begun to ride him with its raking spurs almost from the time he had the handcuff off, and he would pace the floor of the small room in stocking feet, going on for hours. The thought of Joy began to be an obsession. When Dorothy brought in the morning paper on her way home from work he would snatch it away and read the news stories of the man hunt, looking for some mention of her. Then he would make her go out at noon and bring in the afternoon papers as soon as they were on the street. I can't hang around here forever, he thought. I'll go nuts. I've got to try to get out of the state, maybe to Florida or somewhere, and if I don't find out pretty soon where she is I'll have to go anyway.

The fifth day was torment. He could no longer sit still at all and there were moments when he felt that within a matter of hours he would go

berserk and run out into the street to shoot it out with the first policeman he saw. Then he would get hold of himself and force himself to calm clown, knowing that when he did leave the apartment it was going to take all the cunning and cold self-control he possessed to get clear. He rarely spoke to Dorothy now. When she left at three-thirty to go to work he merely stopped his pacing for a moment to growl.

As Dorothy went out the doorway at the foot of the stairs she glanced at the mailboxes through habit, then stopped. There was a letter in hers. She opened the box and took it out, glancing at it curiously. She very seldom received any mail, and thought it might be only an advertising circular until she saw the handwriting.

She opened it. It was from Joy.

Dear Dorothy:

I hope you will forgive me for not writing to you for so long, but there has been so much trouble, as you have probably read about. I am staying with Sewell's family on their farm up here and they have been so nice to me during this trying time. Mr. Neely is a charming old gentleman, you would love him, and Sewell's brother Mitchell is the handsomest thing, you wouldn't believe it, really. There is a young sister, too, who is the most adorable thing.

I would like to stay here longer, but I really ought to go back to work. So, Dorothy, I wonder, if you could spare it, would you lend me twenty dollars (\$20.00) for bus fare and expenses so I could come down there and look for a job. The Neelys would just insist on giving it to me if I told them I was short of money, but they have done so much for me already I hate to ask them.

I wouldn't ask anybody but you, for you have always been my best friend. Dorothy, I will pay you back out of my first pay check, of course. Hoping to hear from you soon,

Your loving friend,

Joy

Dorothy slid it back inside the envelope and started to go back up the stairs. I might as well show it to him, she thought wearily. He's so anxious to find her. Let him go on back to her once more.

Then she stopped, halfway up. If he goes there to see her, she thought, they'll kill him. They're bound to be watching all that country for him. I'll wait till I come home from work tonight and that'll give me time to think about it.

When she came home at twelve-thirty the apartment was empty. There was no farewell or note of any kind, but Sewell was gone.

She stood silently for a moment in the middle of the room, feeling the unbearable loneliness coming back. Then she changed into her kimono and sat down on the bed, just staring at her hands in her lap. He would never be back again, but it didn't seem to matter. Nothing seemed to matter at all any more. She didn't even want to cry. After a while she turned on the radio and set the volume low. Moving up to the head of the bed, she put her face up close to the loud-speaker and listened to the dance band coming from the Edgewater Beach in Chicago.

Fourteen

When he had cleared the outskirts of the city, headed east, he looked at the gasoline gauge. It was low, below a quarter full, and he began looking for a station. It was after midnight now but there would still be plenty of them open along the highway. If I was going to steal a car, he thought, why couldn't I have stolen one with a full tank? It was a good car, though, a late-model Lincoln with lots of power.

He passed two or three Stations, large, brilliantly lighted, watching for a smaller one. In them big stations, he thought, even when you stay in the car you got light coming at you from all directions. One Lincoln looks like any other Lincoln, at least till they get it on the pickup list, but my face has been in too many papers.

He hit the open country, and then there was a small town, asleep now except for the flashing caution light across the highway, an all-night café and a constable making his rounds, and on the far end of the darkly huddled cluster of buildings he saw what he wanted. It was a small station, set back slightly from the street, with only one light over the driveway.

The door of the station was open and a youth in grease-stained white sat at a desk looking at the pictures in *Life*. Sewell stopped under the light in the driveway and the young man came out, smiling.

"Yessir," he said eagerly. "Fill her up?" He had friendly gray eyes and big shoulders, and the arms below the rolled-up white sleeves were tanned and heavy, rope-muscled. Football player, Sewell thought.

"Think it'll take about twelve or fifteen," he said, bending his head down and pretending to be looking for something in the glove compartment.

"Regular or ethyl?"

"Ethyl," he said over his shoulder.

The young man went around to the back of the car and took the hose off the hook. Then, suddenly, he was back at the window.

“The keys to the gas tank?” he asked pleasantly.

It’s little things, Sewell thought. Always little things. You can’t think of ‘em all. Lots of people forget to give ‘em the key, sure, but it just takes a little thing like that to start one of ‘em thinking. What kind of dope is it that don’t even know his own car’s got a lock on the gas tank?

“Oh, yeah,” he said casually, still looking down at the road map he had taken out of the glove compartment. He slipped the ignition key out of the lock and passed the leather key container out the window. But suppose it’s not in there? he thought. When the attendant went back around to the rear he shot a hand into the glove compartment again. There it was, a key tied to a small plastic tag.

The attendant was back at the window, handing in the leather key case and smiling apologetically. “None of them seem to fit.”

“Yeah, here it is,” Sewell said, passing the other key out with his left hand. “It was in the glove compartment. Wife uses the car,” he grumbled. “You never know where the hell anything is.”

The gasoline pump stopped ringing and he took out the wallet Dorothy had given him and held a five-dollar bill out the window. The youth gave him the key and went inside for the change. The cash register clanged and he waited impatiently. The car was directly under the single light in the driveway and inside it he was in partial shadow, but the longer this took the more chance there was that the fellow would get a good look at his face. He took the change with his left hand and stowed it in his pocket. The attendant reached for a rag hanging on the pump.

“Never mind the windshield,” Sewell said.

“Lot of bugs splattered on it,” the other urged hesitantly, reaching for the water hose.

“The hell with—” he began, and then stopped. Never attract attention. Never start ‘em thinking. They don’t see you unless you start ‘em thinking. “O.K.,” he said. “Thanks.”

He folded the road map, keeping his face down. He glanced up only once, swiftly. The youth was leaning over the fender, working on the windshield, looking at the bugs on the glass. Or was he looking in? Go on, kid, he thought. Get nosy. Get yourself killed.

I’m just jumpy, he thought. The kid ain’t seen anything. If he’d recognized me it would be on his face.

The youth finished with the windshield and stepped back. He started the motor and slid out of the station, and as he started to swing back on the street he glanced once at the rear-view mirror. He could see the white figure standing under the light, looking after him. Reading the license number? he thought. Maybe I ought to go back and blast him. No. No. Probably just wishing he had a Lincoln himself. It's this forever wondering that gets you after a while.

The highway straightened out and he eased the accelerator in slowly and smoothly, feeling the power. Fifty, sixty, sixty-five . . . Louisiana in another couple of hours, he thought. The only thing, though, is having to get out before I found her.

Back in the station the young man sat down at the desk again with the copy of *Life*, looking at the pretty girls. All those big brown freckles, he thought. I never did get a good look at his face because he was always fooling with that map, but those big splotches on the backs of his hands . . .

He got up and went to the phone on the wall and lifted the receiver off the hook.

"Give me the sheriff's office," he said.

* * *

Mitch awoke in the night, feeling the charged and swollen darkness and the heat. There had been no sound, and as he lay there the stillness was something he could almost hear. There was no accustomed rustle of leaves in the post oaks or sighing of breeze among the pines around the house. The door was only an oblong of lighter blackness than the walls around him, and on beyond he could see no stars above the black line of the trees. In a moment there was a nervous flicker of lightning, far off, because there was no thunder.

He sat up and rolled a cigarette and lit it, the match blinding, brilliant for an instant, and then the night rushed back and swallowed him. It's like waiting for something, he thought. Like waiting. But for what? For rain? It's been threatening ever since dark and ain't rained yet. Maybe it won't. But it's too still; it's a weather-breeder. He thought of two men moving slowly around each other inside the ringed and silent faces at any gathering when there was about to be a fight, the two of them circling and poised,

each waiting for the other to make a move. Why the hell do I keep thinking of that, he thought? I ain't been in a fight, or about to be in any that I know of.

He wondered what time it was, knowing he would not be able to go back to sleep. He was as taut and tightly wound as the night. When he had finished the cigarette he threw it out the door and put on his clothes and went toward the back porch of the house.

As he passed the spot where Joy had put down the water bucket and cried out he thought about it. What the hell did she do a crazy thing like that for? he thought. When I tried to help her she shoved me off like I was trying to rape her. Well, who knows why women do anything? And especially that one.

He lifted the lantern off its nail by the door and lit it, and started down the trail past the barn, going toward the bottom, thinking of the river and worried about it. He had lived here above the river all his life and loved it as an old friend, but he knew its moods and its strength and the things it could do when it had the mind. Twice he had seen it rise without rain, and it was a frightening thing to watch, like seeing a dead body mysteriously come to life and move.

The trail dropped down toward the level floor of the bottom where the lantern threw long pendulum-swinging shadows of his legs against the towering columns of the oaks, and then suddenly there was the sinuous weaving of deadliness ahead of him in the trail, almost under his feet. It was a big rattler, diamond-marked, cold, and silken-flowing, moving up the trail toward higher ground. He caught up a dead limb and smashed it across the head, killing it, and threw the body off the trail. It was a bad sign. There were few rattlers in the bottom, and when you saw one coming up out of the low ground like that it meant high water coming.

He hit water before he got out to the river's bank. When he came to the old wagon road coming downriver and going out to the ford there was muddy water in a low spot in it. He was barefoot, so he stepped in and waded across. It was only a little over his ankles, but it meant the river was spilling up against the tops of its banks in places.

He came out to the ford and stood holding the lantern above his head. As far out as he could see in its feeble circle of light the brown flood slipped past, silent, swollen, bearing on its surface the telltale flotsam of drift,

twigs, limbs, and small logs. A big bridge timber came by, slowly turning end for end on the dark and turgid bosom of the current. It's just like it was that last time, he thought, the year Sewell went away. No rain here at first and it just kept coming up all the time, getting higher and higher every hour, going past quiet like that, like a river of oil, and then when it started to rain it came right out of its banks and over the bottom.

Another foot and it's going to be pushing on that levee we built across the head of the field. And I ain't got my fresno this time to build it up any higher. That road camp we borrowed it from is gone now.

I still got a shovel, though, he thought, silently watching.

Fifteen

He slowed to go through a small town, and suddenly a police car shot out of a side street behind him with the rising snarl of the siren ripping into the night and drawing ice along his back. He hit the accelerator and the speedometer needle began its dizzy swing, thirty-five, fifty, seventy, eighty-five, and still climbing. The highway ran straight out beyond the town and he let it roll, kicking the headlights up on high beam and watching for curves coming up. Then there was a long easy swing to the left and he rode hard on the throttle, hearing the scream of the tires go up higher and higher.

I should have shot the nosy bastard, he thought with cold ferocity. He was looking at me through the windshield all the time. They wouldn't have this car on the pickup list this soon, and I wasn't speeding, so it's only one thing. That nosy punk kid called the cops. And that means there won't be just one of 'em. There'll be a road block somewhere up ahead.

At this speed he could not take his eyes off the road to look back, but he could tell he was slowly pulling away. The siren was dropping behind and the reflection of the headlights was less glaring in his mirror. Going to have to shake 'em fast, though, he thought. They're just chasing me into a road block, and God knows how much time I got before I hit it.

The police car began to drop out of sight behind him for minutes at a time. In another ten miles it was only a faint flashing light seen occasionally far back down the road, and he slowed abruptly, looking for a turnoff. His luck was good and he spotted a gravel road going off to the left inside a mile. He swung into it and cut the lights, waiting.

The police car shot past with the siren screaming and he whirled back onto the road headed the other way, gunning the motor in second to pick up speed. That'll take care of 'em for a few minutes, he thought. But not for long. They'll know it before I can get very far and they'll get on the phone, or on the radio if they got one, and both ends of this road'll be plugged. I can't go south, there's just the Gulf down there. I got to ditch this car and

get another one. The description and license number'll be all over the state in fifteen minutes.

Ten miles back there was a secondary road taking off to the north. There were no cars in sight when he made the turn. The road was narrow and in poor condition, not safe for over forty miles an hour, but it wound north, in the direction he wanted to go. A few miles farther along another one led off to the right and he took that, swinging east again. If I can keep heading north and east, he thought, I ought to hit the highway going north. He looked at the clock on the dash. It was almost two.

He wound for miles through the maze of country roads, past dark farmhouses and through desolate second-growth timber. The worn macadam pavement gave way to gravel in places, and then went back to macadam again. He was on a graded dirt road when the rain began. I got to get out of this mess and back on the highway before it begins to get slick, he thought. If I get stuck out here I'll be in a hell of a mess.

Then, shortly after three o'clock, he came into a small town and there was the pavement going north. The town was asleep, dark in the rain, except for an all-night filling station. He turned left and picked up speed again.

I'm going toward home now, he thought. When I cross the river up there I'll be within fifteen miles of the old place. I hope they don't expect me to drop in for a visit. He grinned coldly. Time's going to be kind of pressing for that. I wonder what the old man's selling these days, now that he's diddled off everything he ever owned.

The rain was coming down harder now, and it reminded him of that other night a week ago with George driving and himself in the back seat shackled to Harve, going to the penitentiary. God, he thought, was that only a week ago? It seems like a year. Remembering Harve, he thought of Joy, coldly and regretfully. Ain't no help for it, he thought. I couldn't find her. And if I get out of this mess alive, that'll be a miracle itself.

Long miles rushed back in the darkness and the slanting gray lines of the rain, and the country towns dropped behind one by one, huddled darkly beside the highway. He slowed a little going through the towns and then hit the accelerator again when he had passed them, feeling a grim satisfaction in the smooth surge of power under his foot.

Then it happened. He was going through one of the small towns, slowly, around thirty-five, and saw the light streaming out into the rain from an all-night cafe and the four or five cars parked in front of it. The last one was a patrol car and it started to back out into the street as he went past. He swerved out, feeling again the icy shiver along his back, and went on at the same speed so as not to draw attention to himself. The patrol car backed on out and straightened up, and for an instant its lights were full on him. The muscles of his back were bunched up in a cold knot and he fought down an almost overpowering impulse to bear down on the accelerator and flee. Maybe they hadn't paid any attention to him. Maybe they didn't even have a bulletin on him yet. Maybe . . . And then the siren snarled, then screamed, as the cruiser shot toward him.

It had terrific pickup and was gaining on him. He gave the big motor wide-open throttle and held it, and when he passed ninety he could see he was gaining back a little of the ground and he began to draw slowly away. It's just a question of which one of us piles up first, he thought. This ain't no hundred-mile highway, to begin with, and at night like this, in the rain . . . Somebody's going to leave it on one of these curves.

They slammed on through another town, and in going out on the other side had to make a right-angled turn. The big Lincoln skidded sickeningly, then straightened. The cruiser was within a half mile of him and it was growing light. I won't be able to pull any turnoff this time, he thought, coldly examining his chance's.

Then, suddenly, he had no chance, and knew it. They were waiting for him at the river. He went slamming down a long turn coming off the hill and saw the river bottom spread out below him in the gray wet dawn, the river in flood and spread out over the bottom, the long fill going across, the big steel bridge black in the rain, and the two patrol cars drawn up and waiting for him. He took it all in in one flashing fraction of a second at ninety miles an hour, coming down off the grade. Jesus, what a sweet setup, he thought. What a stinking, lousy sonofabitch of a thing to run into.

He was going too fast to stop and get out of the car and make a run for the timber on foot. The other car was right behind him. And the two up ahead were pulled part way across the road, one at each end of the bridge. He saw all the terrible beauty of it in one quick, coldly assaying glance. It was perfect. If he shot past the first car and got onto the bridge, the other

one would pull squarely across the other end of it and he would be trapped like a fly in a bottle. And even if he could pull down to a stop before he hit the bridge, he would be caught between the car at this end and the one following him.

He was going too fast. He was right on top of the first car and still doing fifty. They were shooting now; he heard the guns and saw a hole appear in the windshield. Then he slammed into the car. There was a crash and a scream of metal as the right side of the Lincoln tore off the front end of the patrol car. Then he was skidding onto the bridge. The Lincoln was completely out of control. It raked one guard rail, shot across the pavement into the other, then spun end for end and stopped, facing back the way it had come.

Before it was stopped he was out on the bridge in the rain with the gun in his hand. The bridge was about five hundred feet long and he was near the center of it, over the main channel of the river. The patrol cars had both ends of it blocked now, the one chasing him having come up and stopped. They knew it was down here, he thought, and slowed down enough to get under control.

There was no panic in him now that he had finally been trapped, only a cold and terrible concentration as he looked swiftly around at the river bottom and at the two ends of the bridge to see how many men there were. He could see two at one end and three at the other, and now they were pulling rifles from the cars.

No protection behind the car, he thought, because they're on both sides of me. And this .38 ain't no good against them rifles. Couldn't even hit a barn with it at this distance.

He put the gun back in his pocket and ran for the rail. There was the sudden impact of something crashing into his arm and he spun around and fell, hearing the rifle shot crack in his ears. He got up and made it this time and climbed over, holding to a slanting steel girder. They were running toward him, but not all of them at once, for the rifles cracked twice more and lead slammed into the girder to go flattened and screaming off into the rain. He looked down. The muddy and drift-laden surface of the flood was about twelve feet below him. He let go and dropped.

He took a deep breath before he hit the water and let himself go deep into it, and then began kicking downstream, going along with the current

and pushing upward with his hands to keep from coming to the surface. When his lungs could stand no more he swam upward and felt his head go above water. He took another breath and went under again as a small geyser exploded just beyond his face. This time he changed course slightly and went quartering down the current in order not to come up too near to where they would be expecting him.

They'll be coming down the river, he thought. The current's carrying me along and two or three more dives and I'll be out of range of the bridge, but they ain't going to stay up there like it was a shooting gallery. The river's overflowed the main channel but they can still get along the banks all right. It won't be over knee-deep. One of 'em will stay on the bridge and there'll be a couple of 'em coming down each bank, and there ain't no way in Christ's world I can get out of here. And I sure as hell can't swim from here to the Gulf of Mexico underwater.

He came up again. This time with the swift intake of breath he took a quick and sweeping look around across the drift-laden, roily surface of the flood, seeing the two men in black slickers splashing along the bank. One of them spotted his head out in the current and stopped to raise the rifle, yelling, and he went under, but not before he had seen the drifting sweet-gum tree some thirty feet to his left and slightly upstream. Just as his head went under he heard and felt the sharp concussion as a rifle bullet hit the surface and glanced off. A half second later, he thought, and my head would have been busted open like a green gourd.

He turned underwater and fought his way across the current toward the place the tree had been. It was a small sweet gum, not much more than a sapling, but he knew there would be submerged branches he could locate if he could come near it underwater.

They'll be looking for me downstream, he thought. The thing is to find it and come up inside the limbs. If I can hold straight enough I may be able to do it. Must have come twenty feet now, and it should be right ahead, not more'n another ten feet. Can't figure out about that arm. It was hit, but I don't feel nothing. Hardly nothing at all. Must not have hit the bone, because I can swim with it. If it had, the bone would have been busted all to hell. They weren't shooting 22's. Well, I ain't in any hurry to feel it. When the shock wears off I'll get it all right.

I must have passed that tree. Come fifty feet anyway, and I must have got off the course and missed it. And it ain't going to do no good to make a second run at it, because when I come up over here instead of downstream they'll know what I'm up to and they'll start blowing the tree out of the water. I missed it, that's all. Then leaves and small twigs brushed the top of his head and he felt a surge of hope.

Right under it, he thought. He raked upward with his right arm and felt a limb, still underwater, and began following it up, forcing himself to go slowly in spite of the pain in his lungs. Then there was the trunk of the tree directly over his head. He held onto the limb under the surface and came up slowly until his face was just out of the water. He took a deep, gasping breath and opened his eyes. It was perfect.

The tree was eight or ten inches in diameter here, with a couple of inches of it out of the water. Several limbs took off at this point and his head was in a cluster of leaves and small twigs. Through breaks in the foliage he could see the two men on the near bank, standing now in knee-deep water and intently searching the surface of the flood downstream, waiting for him to come up. It fooled 'em, he thought, and started to swing his head slowly around to look out at the opposite bank for the other two when he heard an ominous and terrible buzzing just back of his ear like an egg beater whirring in a pile of dead leaves and felt all his nerve ends turn to ice in one of the few moments of absolute terror he had ever known.

Cold fury looked at him six inches in front of his face, and the deadly triangular head drew back to strike. The big rattler had been stretched along a limb as high as it could get out of the water it hated, and his movement or the pull of the current had disturbed the balance of the tree and rolled the limb downward toward the water. There was no time to pull his head back or submerge. One more slightest move and it would strike him full in the face. He brought a hand up and took the deadly, loathsome impact of it on his wrist and felt the puncture of the fangs. His hand closed over the body just back of the head and he pulled it below the surface, squeezing terribly with all his strength, feeling the sinuous, thick-bodied power of its threshing, and then the fangs pierced his hand once more before it stilled. He let it go and vomited into the water in front of his face.

Sixteen

Joy lay on her bed in the hot, close-pressing darkness and listened to the soft breathing of the younger girl across the room. It had been almost a half hour since she had heard the sibilant scuffing of Mitch's bare feet on the sand in the back yard and had seen the light glow through the battenless crack in the back wall of the room. She knew he had come up on the back porch and lit the lantern for something, then there was the retreating snup, snup, snup of his feet going away toward the barn, and the light had faded away.

What was he doing out there at this time of night? she wondered. There wasn't even any way of knowing what time it was, for she had been lying awake for hours, long after Jessie had gone to sleep. She wondered if the hatred would ever let her sleep again. Closing her eyes, she could see him now, going somewhere with the lantern, down the trail toward the bottom perhaps, lank, straight-backed, bitter-faced, and hateful, and the vision made her sick with rage. Her mind swung, hate-lured, to one of the facets of her dream. She was driving a Cadillac along a tree-shaded boulevard, young and radiant in a gold lamé evening gown, while a handsome young millionaire made love to her at her side, and saw Mitch lying in a ditch beside the road with an arm outstretched in beseeching agony and the thin, harsh angularity of his face bearing the ravages of some loathsome disease like leprosy. She stopped, the car and went back to bend over him, and when he looked up in supplication she spat full in his face and laughed, and went on laughing with contempt and scorn, pointing at him so the young man in the car could laugh too. Oh, God, she thought, isn't there anything I can do to him? If there was something, if there was some way to hurt him I could sleep again.

Suddenly she heard the faint sound of an automobile across the oppressive stillness and wondered whose it was. It came on down the sand-hill road leading in from the highway, and then turned, going along the hill

toward the Jimerson place. It was probably Cal or Prentiss, she thought, coming home from a dance. It went on, the sound fading away, and then it stopped. She was sure she had heard the motor sound die abruptly. But why would anybody stop up there? She must have been mistaken. It had probably just gone around a bend in the road.

Minutes dragged by and she forgot about it. I'm going to the if I don't go to sleep, she thought. If there was just some way I could hurt him, and see I was hurting him, and have him know I was seeing and was doing it on purpose so he would know how much I loathe and despise him and hate him and have ever since the first time I ever saw him, and that I was just making fun of him and laughing at him when I did that, when he shoved me. Oh, God, help me do it.

She held her breath a moment and lay still, listening. What was it she had heard, out there in the yard? Terror ran through her for an instant and she wanted to scream, but held it in. Was it Mitch, still wandering around outside? No, there it was again and it was not the sound his bare feet had made or the sure, arrogant, fast-legged walk of Mitch at all. Whoever it was seemed to be walking erratically; there would be two or three steps in hurried succession and then a sudden and pregnant silence as they stopped. She sat up in bed, thinking again of the car and the way the motor had stopped.

"Joy!" The hoarse whisper floated in through the window. She turned and could see nothing in the blackness. Oh, it's that stupid Cal Jimerson, she thought with a sigh of relief. That was his car up there in the road. He must be drunk, or crazy. Is he dumb enough to think I'm going to go out there when Jessie's right here in the same room?

She slipped silently out of bed and stepped to the window on bare feet, hurriedly, to stop him before he could make any more noise. She put her hands on the sill and looked out. It was too dark to see anything but the shadowy bulk of him against the night. "Hush, you crazy fool!" she whispered. "Go away."

"H'lo, Joy," he said, not whispering, but low-voiced. She could smell the sour stink of the whiskey. "Got drink in the car. Come out, let's talk. Want to talk to you."

"Go home, you crazy idiot," she hissed fiercely. "You're drunk."

Then she heard Jessie stir on the bed behind her. Panic seized her and she leaned forward with an arm outstretched to put a hand over his mouth, if she could find it, before he could speak again.

Jessie was sitting up in bed. "Joy, what is it?"

At the same instant she felt Cal's hand close over her arm and start to pull, and in a bursting flash of inspiration so fast it was almost pure reflex she cried out with terror in her voice, "Mitch! Turn me loose, Mitch. Please!"

Her thigh and knees bumped the sill as she fell through the window on top of the stupidly weaving Cal. He caught her and staggered, almost falling. When her feet were on the ground she swung a hand, hard, and it exploded against his face with a sharp slap audible across the clearing. She wrestled out of his arms and hit him again and he moved back; then, as it began to penetrate his drunkenness that there was too much noise and everybody was going to be awake in a minute, he turned and started running toward the road.

She fell, sobbing, to the ground just as Jessie came running around the side of the house.

"Joy, where are you? Are you hurt?" the younger girl was crying anxiously. She saw the white blur of the night gown and knelt down hurriedly beside the figure sprawled in the sand.

"Did he hurt you? Are you all right?" She put a hand on Joy's heaving shoulder, but got no answer except sobs. She slid an arm tenderly under Joy's head and helped her to sit up.

"Can you stand up?" she asked. "Put your arm over my shoulder, honey. And raise up when I stand up."

Joy got to her feet with her arm about the young girl's shoulders and they went around the corner and into the house, walking slowly while she still shook with crying. She collapsed on the bed in tragic and shaken helplessness while Jessie struck a match to light the lamp.

Soft yellow light flooded the room and Jessie went over to the window and pulled the curtains, then closed the door. Joy lay listening to her, and when Jessie came over to the bed she turned on her back and drew a hand across her eyes to wipe away the tears.

"I—I'm all right, honey," she said shakily. "It was just the—the awful scare. He ran away, and the fall didn't hurt me."

“Are you sure?” Jessie implored anxiously. “Are you sure you didn’t break anything?” She pulled down her nightgown and brushed sand from the sheet, fussing over her.

“Yes,” Joy said bravely. “I’m all right, honey.”

Jessie’s fright was over now and her smooth child’s face was growing white with anger. The nostrils of the pert nose were pinched and pale, and her chin was more stubborn than Joy had ever seen it. The large blue eyes did not look like those of a child at all.

“How did it happen, Joy?” she asked ominously. “I just heard you scream as I sat up in bed, and the next thing you fell out of the window. You screamed something about Mitch. Was it him?”

This is where I have to do it right, Joy thought. It would be so easy to overdo it and botch it. And I wish I didn’t have to do it. Not to this kid, because she *is* sweet, but I’d do anything to her or anybody else I had to if it was the only way to get even with that bastard.

“I—I don’t know, Jessie,” she said. “I don’t think it was. It must have been somebody else. I don’t think Mitch would do a thing like that.” Her voice quivered.

“But I *heard* you say Mitch! That was what you screamed just as you fell.”

Joy shook her head, nobly and with an infinite sadness. “No, that wasn’t — I mean, what it was, I must have just screamed to Mitch help. I mean, he’s the only man around, and—”

“Joy! Trying to cover up for him is all right, and I might know you’d do it, you’re so sweet; but I know what I heard. And I haven’t forgot what he was trying to do when you went out there to the well tonight. I saw that!”

Joy gave way to tears again for a minute, but regained control of herself. She had just heard Cal’s automobile start up there on the road. “No, Jessie,” she said wanly, “I just don’t know. It’s such an awful thing, I wouldn’t accuse Mitch of it unless I was absolutely sure. I just don’t think it was.”

“We’ll see,” Jessie said ominously. She got up off the bed and started toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Joy asked in alarm. “Out to his room. I’ll find out.”

“No, Jessie,” Joy urged piteously. “Don’t go out there. Whoever it was might be still around. It’s too dangerous.”

“They won’t bother me,” Jessie said, her eyes snapping with anger. She opened the door and went out.

If Mitch is there, Joy thought, if he’s come back, all I have to do is say I told you so, I knew it wasn’t Mitch. And if he *hasn’t* come back I don’t have to say anything. Nobody would ever be able to convince her it wasn’t him, especially after that thing tonight. He’s a stupid cluck; he’d fall for anything.

Jessie was back in a minute. “He wasn’t even there,” she said angrily. “And you were trying to cover up for him, Joy!”

“I just didn’t know for sure, honey,” Joy said sadly. “Maybe it was just a joke.”

“A joke!”

Jessie stood in the middle of the room with her whole small body radiating anger for a minute; then she went slowly over to her own bed and sat down. Her shoulders slumped, as if with tiredness, and she seemed to collapse in some odd manner without changing size or position, just as if the fierce energy of her spirit had suddenly wilted and let her fall in on herself. She did not cry or say anything for a long time. The wide blue eyes were dry as she looked down at her scuffed, unlaced shoes, but there was an uncomprehending look of hurt in them that was worse than tears.

Joy left her alone. She lay on her bed, waiting. There’s no use in saying anything more now, she thought. Let her say it. I’m a lousy bitch, all right. I guess I always have been. But there wasn’t any other way to get even with him.

After a while Jessie looked up. “Joy,” she asked quietly, “when you get the money from your friend, and get ready to leave, do you think I could go with you?”

“Do you want to leave here, honey?”

“Yes. I want to go away.”

“Of course you can go with me, baby. We can make out some way.”

They turned the light out in a few minutes and Joy lay for a while thinking about it. So he thinks I’m not good enough for the kid to be around, she thought. Well, I guess now he’s right, but he sure as hell ain’t going to like it, knowing he is.

Then, for the first time since Mitch had shoved her contemptuously into the dirt, she dropped off to sleep.

Seventeen

When would it start?

It was like waiting for an explosion after the fuse had been touched off, The four small needle-like punctures in his wrist and hand were nothing, like a fuse burning, and not very painful, but somewhere inside him the mysterious chemistry of the venom waited to begin its slow-burning explosion that would swell and blacken his body and bring death in the end.

Even in that chilling first minute after the snake had hit he had not even considered calling out to the men and surrendering. It had not occurred to him, and if it had he would have brushed it aside. It did not matter that they could have rushed him to a doctor for treatment and saved him. For what? he would have thought. The electric chair?

The tree swung lazily in the eddying brown sweep of the current and he held onto the limb with only his face out of the water, watching the hooded banks and the timber go slowly past in the rain. He could see the men in black raincoats still splashing through the water along the banks, running downstream and intently searching the surface of the flood for him, and knew the trick had fooled them. As long as he did not move or come too far out of the water among the leaves of the small sweet gum, they would not discover him, and with the current carrying him on down the chances were very good that in another mile or less he would be beyond them and they would go on back to the highway and he would be alone with the river.

No, not alone, he thought. I got the snake in me. I'm about as much alone as a woman seven months gone. I got nobody to talk to, but I got company just the same.

Them bastards with the black slickers will go back to the highway after a while, he thought, and they'll think I drowned or that they got me with that last shot, but that ain't going to mean they'll quit looking for me. They'll go right on till they find something, even if it's just rotten meat. I couldn't never get out of here, even if I didn't have the snake in me.

There was no fear of dying, only a cold and terrible anger at it and regret at the thought of Joy. I had a whole week, he thought, and I never got close to her. A whole week to get her, and it's all gone now.

The tree swung around a wide bend in the river and for a moment he could see both banks at once behind him. The men with the guns had stopped. He drifted on around the bend and they were out of sight behind him.

Then in a few minutes he began to shake as with a chill and he could feel the first faint, whirling giddiness of nausea pushing upward inside his stomach. So that's how it starts, he thought.

* * *

At dawn it had begun to rain, and the river was spilling over its banks. Mitch came up out of the bottom, walking fast with the extinguished lantern swinging in his hand and urgency prodding his thin-shanked, furious stride. He hung the lantern and his raincoat on the porch and went into the kitchen, the calloused soles of his feet rasping against the worn and silvered planking of the floor. Jessie was cooking breakfast, and looked up without greeting.

"I ain't got time to eat," he said. "You got any coffee ready, Jessie?"

She looked through and beyond him, still-faced, un-recognizing. "No," she said with distant coldness.

He stopped, his mind coming back from the river. "What's the matter with you?" Then he noticed she was wearing the homemade play suit, which amounted to little more than a pair of too short rompers and a halter.

"I thought I told you to burn that thing," he said.

"Did you?" she asked without interest.

"I certainly did. Go in there in the bedroom and put on some clothes and hand me that thing. No sister of mine is going around looking like a half-feathered jay bird.

"There was disgust and a cold and infinite contempt in the glance she gave him. "Well, you've certainly got a nerve."

Mitch had never been one to heed warning signals or ask any discreet questions. Frontal assault was the only tactic he had ever learned. Women, even his adored younger sister, were of another race, and the oblique and

sometimes devious courses of their mental processes met with no understanding and only scant interest in his forthrightly masculine and uncomplex philosophy. She was his sister, he was older than she was and consequently knew better what was good for her, he loved her, and the clothes she was wearing were indecent—these were all the facts in the case as far as he was concerned, and were sufficient for action. He was no more equipped to cope with the idea that Joy might have put her up to it for the foreseen and calculated effect of his inevitable reaction than he was to play a dozen simultaneous and blindfolded games of chess.

“Did you hear what I said, Jessie?”

“I heard you.” She went right on turning over eggs in the frying pan.

“Are you going to do what I told you?”

Now she put the egg turner down in the pan. “I am *not*. I’ll wear what I please, and if I wanted to I’d go naked. It wouldn’t be any of your business.”

His face darkened and he took her by the arm, propelling her toward the bedroom. Surprisingly enough, she went without protest. She walked in and sat down on the bed.

“You can get your own breakfast,” she said with sullen defiance.

“Never mind breakfast. Are you going to change those clothes?”

“No. And you might as well get used to doing your own cooking. Joy is leaving in another day or so and I’m going with her. If it’s any of your business.”

He had closed the door to give her a chance to change. Now he yanked it open with furious suddenness. She was still sitting in the same position on the bed.

“You’re what?” he demanded, not believing he had heard her correctly. “What did you say?”

“I said,” she repeated coldly, “that I was going with Joy. We’re going to live together in Houston. In an apartment.”

“Well, you can just get that idea out of your head right now,” he snapped. “Any time I let you go off with that—” He stopped. For all his outward assurance he was beginning to feel a vague uneasiness. This wasn’t the Jessie he had always known, sunny, high-spirited, and warmly impulsive. Fiercely independent she had always been, but still levelheaded and loving, and when they had had arguments she had always scolded him

like an impudent squirrel. But this sullen-eyed, contemptuous mutiny was something new and a little frightening.

“Where’d you get this crazy idea?” he demanded.

“What business is it of yours?”

He made an effort to control his anger. “It’s plenty of my business. Joy is no woman for you to be around. She’s no good.” Characteristically, out of a hundred possible things he could have said, he had chosen the absolute worst.

Instantly she was a bristling porcupine. “*You* have got the nerve to stand there and say something like that about Joy? *You*? Will you please get out of this room?”

“Well, you ain’t going off with Joy. I’ll tell you that.”

“And just how are you going to keep me from it?”

His face was bleak. “I’ll take a harness strap to you.”

“And you think that’ll stop me?”

Suddenly he knew it wouldn’t. Punishing her couldn’t keep her from leaving. How could it? The moment his back was turned she would be gone if nothing except the fear of punishment kept her here.

Joy was at the bottom of this, he knew. Where was she? He whirled out of the doorway, and then he heard the porch swing creaking. Forgotten for the moment was the flooding river and the danger to the crop in the bottom. That would have to wait a little while longer.

He went down the hall in three furious strides and emerged harsh-laced onto the porch. She was lolling in the swing with one leg double under her and an arm thrown carelessly along the back. There was a fresh blue ribbon in her hair and she had on a short, frilly summer dress scarcely down to her knees. She wore high-heeled red shoes, with no stockings, and one bare leg pushed idly against the floor to keep the swing moving.

She let her head tilt back to look up at him with a lazy smile.

“Well, it’s Mitch. My, don’t you look mad?”

“What’s this Jessie just told me?” he asked curtly.

She shook her head, still smiling. “Goodness, Mitch, how do I know? What *did* she tell you?”

“The hell you don’t know. She says she’s going to go with you when you leave.”

“Oh, yes. Isn’t that sweet of her? She wants to go live with me.”

“Well, she’s not,” he said furiously.

“Why, Mitch? Has she changed her mind?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“I’ll change it for her. She’s not going.”

She dropped the bantering pose for a moment and looked at him with the open hatred in her eyes. “What makes you think so?”

“I won’t let her.”

“And just how do you think you’re going to stop her?”

He was up against the same thing again. He began to feel that the top of his head was going to blow off in the maddening fury of his impotence.

“She’s got her back up about something,” he said, forcing himself to be calm. “I want to know what it is.”

She was smiling again now with an infuriating provocativeness. “Oh, that. She’s mad at you because she thinks it was you that tried to pull me out of the window last night and made me fall.”

“Tried to pull you out of the window? What the hell—”

“Oh, haven’t you heard about that, Mitch? Or have you? Why, just look at what you—I mean, whoever it was—did to my poor legs.”

Still watching him with that tantalizing smile, she reached down and pulled the dress halfway up her long, smooth thighs. “Look at the nasty bruises where I hit the window sill. Now, was that a nice thing for somebody to do? Just to get a girl to come out and play?”

“And you told her I did that?” he asked ominously.

“Oh, no. As a matter of fact, I told her I didn’t think it was you. But she wouldn’t believe me. I don’t know who it was. It just seems to me, though, that it was an awful rough way to try to make a girl. Maybe that’s the only way *you* could, though.”

For a moment he was speechless with the rage that was clotted up inside and choking him. She made no attempt whatever to pull the dress down, and continued to watch him lazily, with that same calculated seductiveness. Deliberately reaching out the long bare leg, she placed the toe of a red shoe against his knee and pushed, setting the swing in motion again.

“But you were talking about Jessie,” she went on. “You don’t have to worry about her, Mitch. A couple of girls can always get by somehow.”

“You lousy tramp!” His arm swung down and across, and the hard flat palm of his hand smacked against the leg with a retort like the slap of a beaver’s tail. The force of it pushed her around in the swing.

She laughed. "You poor, stupid jerk."

Then they both heard the rapid tattoo of Jessie's shoes in the hall. Joy huddled in the corner of the swing, the derisive laughter gone now and replaced with a pitiful and abject terror while she put an arm up as if to protect herself against further attack: Jessie hit him from the back like a hurtling terrier, and when he turned she slapped his face.

Contempt in the eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl, he decided, was one of the worst things he had ever faced in his life.

Eighteen

The danger in the river bottom could wait no longer. Mitch left them and ran through the back yard, grabbing up a shovel as he went. He was getting nowhere here, and this would have to wait now.

By the time he reached the bottom the river had overflowed into the low ground where the old channel had been. It was backed up half knee-deep against the levee on the upper side of the field and still rising. There was no current here; that was beyond, where the river made its wide bend, pushing water out over the bottom. But if it got high enough to take the levee out, there would be current, a small river of it going out across the field, knocking the cotton down under the piled driftwood and silt and leaving absolute ruin.

It lay still and dark like an overflowed lake out among the trees beyond the fence, the surface quiet except for the pockmarks of the rain. He had not been a moment too soon. Even as he came out into the field he heard a gurgle of water behind him, and turned swiftly to see it boiling up springlike out of an old gopher hole in the cotton rows six feet behind the levee. Running along the top, he peered down at the water line on the upper side until he found it, a small sucking whirlpool disappearing into the ground. He sprang back and began throwing dirt onto the whirlpool until it stopped, then jumped in to pack it down with his feet. Those small holes could be dangerous.

The old levee had been there for seven years and he knew it was crisscrossed and undermined with gopher runs and the burrowings of moles. As the level of the water rose on the other side it would find them and start pouring through, cutting larger and larger with every minute. And there were low places that needed building up, trails worn across by the passing feet of seven years of going to and from the field. He swung the shovel, oblivious of the rain and the passage of time, going up and down the levee building up the low spots and weak places and watching for leaks. The

raincoat was too awkward to work in, so he took it off and threw it on the ground, and in a few minutes he was soaked. The waterlogged old straw hat sagged in front of his face, making it difficult for him to see, and he yanked it off and threw it after the coat.

There would be no help, and he expected none. Cass was beyond helping or being helped. It was not so much the physical disability of what had apparently become a permanent affliction of “the miseries” in his legs as it was his almost complete withdrawal from reality. It ain’t like he was even here any more, Mitch thought. It’s more like he wasn’t just sitting in front of that radio now waiting for it to come out to him, but was trying to get in there where it was. He don’t like this world no more because you get beat up so damn much in it, so he’s finding himself another one.

And all the while, below the dark and violent surface of the battle against the river and a disaster that could be recognized as such and fought against with weapons he could hold in his hands, there ran the apprehensive undercurrent of his fear for Jessie. She can’t go away with that no-good slut, he thought. She just can’t. She’d be safer with a rattlesnake. She’d be better off dead. He wanted to throw the shovel down and run all the way to the house and tell her, make her understand. But how? Hadn’t he just told her? And what good had it done? He’d just made it worse.

He couldn’t leave the river, anyway. Water was still piling up beyond the levee, waiting with its dark treachery to find some small leak the moment his back was turned. A trickle somewhere, untended, could take the whole thing out in a matter of minutes, and they would lose the crop. He stood up for a minute with his yellow hair plastered down to his skull by the rain, his face harsh and implacable, and cursed it all, the river, the water above the levee, and the rain. And damn her too, he thought.

The river wanted the crop, and Joy was going to take Jessie away. You could fight the river with a shovel, or with your bare hands if you had to, but what could you fight Joy with? Where did you start? Or was it too late now even to think of starting? God knows Jessie would be better off somewhere else, he thought, away from this long-gone, share-cropping, hungry-gut ruin of a farm that the old man’s let dribble through his fingers, somewhere where she could go to school and have decent clothes like other girls her age, but that wasn’t with Joy. It wouldn’t ever be with that

conscienceless and unprincipled round-heeled bitch if he could help it, not with Jessie idolizing her that way and copying everything she did.

What does she want Jessie to go with her for, anyway? he thought, attacking a leak in the levee with bitter fury. You can tell by looking at her she don't care anything about anybody but herself, and never did, It just don't make sense to me that she'd want to be saddled with a fifteen-year-old country girl that hadn't even been nowhere. The way she looked at me once there in the swing, you almost got an idea of what she was driving at. It was me. She wanted to do something to me. Well, she is, but it ain't over yet. If she's got it in for me, she's perfectly welcome to take it out on *me* any way she can or wants to, but she ain't going to take it out on Jessie. God knows, the kid never had much chance to grow up like a girl, as it was, with no mother after she was a year old and only a couple of hard-tailed and knot-headed brothers to look after her while the old man wandered around in a cloud and hardly even noticed whether she was a boy or a girl, but she's going to have what little chance there is.

But how do you go about it? he thought, full of a gray and hopeless rage. Ordering Jessie to stay here and telling her she ain't going won't do any good. She's got a mind of her own, and I can't keep her tied up. So far, I've just balled things up worse. When I lost my head there on the porch and slapped her damned leg off me, I just made a worse mess out of things. I reckon that was just what she was trying to get me to do and I walked right into it. So now Jessie thinks I was trying to beat her up. Something like that would make a big hit with Jessie, too.

He did not even see Cass until the old man was almost upon him, hurrying down the hill in an old greenish-black felt hat and a useless raincoat ripped up one side almost to the armpit. When he heard the shouts he straightened up and turned around, watching while his father motioned with his arm and yelled again.

"What is it?" he shouted back, throwing another shovelful of dirt on a low spot on the levee. For a man who's so stove up in the legs he can't get around, he thought, he's making pretty good time.

"It's Sewell," Cass shouted, reaching the upper end of the levee and puffing on through the rain atop it like a man walking a log. Goddamnit, Mitch thought, does he have to walk up there and tear it down as fast as I get it built up?

Then it hit him. It was as if the levee and the rising water and the desperate urgency of holding up this straining bulwark against disaster, together with the somber and uneasy dread in his thoughts of Jessie, had occupied every corner of his mind to the extent that there was no room for anything else, and it took time for any other idea to filter in and find room for itself.

“Sewell?” he demanded. He stuck the shovel in the ground and looked at his father. “What about Sewell?”

Cass could not come to rest. He slid down off the top of the levee and continued walking up and down past him, holding his hand over his heart and breathing with the difficulty of a wind-broken horse. Taking an old bandanna out of his overalls pocket, he dabbed at his eyes and blew his nose, and then bent over again with his hand over his heart.

“It’s Sewell,” he panted, holding out one arm to point toward the river. “Just come over the radio.”

“What just come over the radio?”, Mitch asked furiously. What’d he come all the way down here for if ain’t going to make no more sense than that?

”He’s in the river. Out yonder in the river somewheres,” the older man gasped, beginning now to get some of his breath back. “He had a fight with the shurf’s men up at the highway bridge and he’s in the river.”

“Well, what in hell is he doing in the river?” Mitch burst out. “Is he shot? Did he fall in? How do they know he’s in it?”

“I’m trying to tell you, as fast as I get my breath, that’s where he is,” Cass rushed on, for some reason still pointing out toward the river as if to keep this incredible fact established. “Three, four hours ago, along about daylight. They was chasing him in a car and he ran into a whole passel of the shurf’s men on the highway bridge, and they penned him up there where he couldn’t get away in the car, and then there was a gun fight and they shot him once with a rifle, but he jumped off the bridge into the river and every time he’d come up they was ashooting at him.”

“Well, where is he now?” Mitch asked savagely. “What’s the rest of it?”

“He’s in the river somewheres. That’s what I been telling you.”

“Did they hit him? Or did he get away?” Ain’t there any way, he thought, that I can get it out of him?

“That’s what they don’t, know for sure,” Cass said, having to take down the frozen, pointing arm to get the handkerchief out of his pocket again. He put it up to his eyes and started shaking his head from side to side. “They don’t know what happened, because they shot three or four times while he was going down the river, every time his head would come up for air, and the last time they shot just as he was going under and they never did see him come up no more. They went down the river for a mile, looking. The man on the radio said there wasn’t no way he could have come out, because there was a bunch of ‘em on both sides of the river and they never did even see his head come up no more after the last shot. He’s been shot, or drowned in the river.”

Mitch stood quietly in the rain, holding onto the shovel handle and looking down at his feet in the mud. I been trying to tell him for a long time, he thought, that sooner or later he was going to hear something on that damned radio he didn’t want to hear.

Cass began walking back and forth again. “Well, come on, Mitch. Gather up your stuff and let’s go,” he said wildly.

Mitch stared at him. “Go where?” he asked.

Cass stopped pacing and looked at him blankly, like a bewildered and sodden-hatted kewpie doll left out in the rain.

“Where?” he asked.

“Where? Well, surely you ain’t going to stay down here in the field. Don’t you understand what I been saying? Sewell’s in the river. He’s been shot. You can’t just stay down here and not do nothing.”

“Just what do you expect me to do?” Mitch asked.

“Do? Why—why—” Cass said incredulously, “why, come up to the house. Listen to the radio. To the news.” It was as if the whole course had been perfectly clear in his mind until Mitch had begun asking his stupid questions, and then he had to cast about for the answer himself.

Mitch began to comprehend some of it then. Sewell’s been shot on the radio, he thought. He’s in this river down here, but it’s actually the radio river, or he can’t make up his mind which it is, and they’re hunting for him on the radio, and there can’t none of it really happen anywhere except on the radio. He can’t make up his mind whether it’s really Sewell they’re looking for or whether it’s a radio game called Sewell Neely.

“What do I want to listen to the news for?” he asked quietly.

“Why,” Cass sputtered, “to find out what’s happened. To see if he’s been
—been—”

“And what,” Mitch asked slowly, “do I do after I find out?”

Nineteen

“Ain’t you going to do anything? Anything a-tall?” Cass cried out piteously.

“Yes,” Mitch replied, still speaking quietly. “I’m going to keep on piling dirt on this levee. You see that water over there?” He pointed with the shovel. Just three or four inches below the top of the levee in places now, it waited, poised, straining, and heavy, the dark surface of it quiet except for the dimpling of the rain. “You know what’s going to happen to that cotton back there if it goes out?”

“Cotton?” Cass repeated blankly. “Cotton? Don’t you understand, Mitch? Ain’t I telling you? Sewell’s shot. Won’t you listen? He’s shot. In the river.”

As he swung his head to look at the cotton whose existence he did not even recognize, water sprayed off the brim of the old greenish-black hat. Reaching up, he removed it and took it in his two hands and began wringing it out as naturally and as unconsciously as some pixie-like old crone of a charwoman wringing out a mop. A discolored stream of water sprayed across his feet.

He began to cry, still twisting the hat. In a moment he unwound it and put a hand inside the crown to open it up again, and then placed it, misshapen and crosswise, upon his head. Mitch heard the sudden gurgle of water and turned to see a small stream gushing from another gopher hole in the levee. Snatching at the shovel handle, he leaped toward it and began throwing dirt across onto the front face of it until it stopped.

Cass bounded after him, bandy-legged, weeping, importunate. “I been bereft,” he cried. “I been berefted by everybody. One of my boys is killed in the river and the other one’s so hardhearted he don’t even care. It’s a judgment. It’s a judgment on me.”

Mitch stopped the fury of his shoveling and turned, a savage impatience in his face, and started to lash out at him to go on back to the house, but he bit the words off and his expression softened as he looked at the hopeless

ruin of the man, the futile eyes wet with tears and the faded doll's face, too weak even for tragedy, lost, hopeless, uncomprehending, under the grotesquely comic misshapen hat. It's all mixed up for him, he thought. It should have stayed on the radio. As long as it was all on the radio, it was a Sewell Neely game and they gave five hundred dollars to whoever guessed the answer, but now part of it's got away from him and it's his own boy that's lying on the bottom of the river, or at least part of the time it is, and he don't know what to do about it.

"You go on back to the house, Dad," he said gently. "Just listen to the radio and wait. That's all you can do. I've got to get to work."

"It's the sin of the world," Cass cried out. "Hard-heartedness is the sin of the world." He turned away and started to run, going toward the river. One hand came up to clasp the brim of the obscenely comic hat as if a sudden gale had sprung up and he had to hold onto this last of his earthly possessions to keep it from blowing away. Discovering after a dozen bounds that he was going in the wrong direction, he stopped and wheeled about, and then came back, charging past Mitch, unseeing, oblivious, head bent forward as if into a gale and still holding onto the hat. Then he was gone, running up the hill into the edge of the timber, going toward the house.

Mitch looked after him for a moment, then bent to the shovel again.

Noon came and went with the sodden drumming of rain while he fought the rising water with the shovel like some lost soul before the fuel piles of hell. He stopped endless gopher holes and built up all the low places, and then started across building the whole levee higher. When he had gone the full length of it he started back again, still piling up more dirt. Now and then he would stop for a moment to catch his breath and stare bleakly at the water, still rising, but more slowly now beyond the levee. His fingers would be stiff and curved into the form of the shovel handle and would ache when he straightened them. And whenever he paused like this, even for a few seconds, his eyes, after sweeping across the threatening and precariously held wall of water beyond him, would start to swing outward toward the river while his mind turned uncontrollably to the picture of Sewell lying somewhere on its bottom with his face in the mud and the flood rolling over him. It ain't going to do no good to cry about it, he would think, and I *can*

maybe do some good here. He would tear himself away from it and go back to the endless scoop, lift, and swing of the shovel.

After a while the searchers came down the hill and passed him, going into the bottom, two at first, then one, and later on two more, white-hatted, black-slickered, carrying rifles in the crooks of their arms, and he cursed them bitterly and went on with the work. They would ask the same unvarying, inevitable, and stupid questions and listen without violence—knowing who he was—while he cursed them. He could think of no reason for his bitterness and the bleak-faced tirade of curses other than that they were looking for the dead body of his brother, either for the five-hundred-dollar reward or because they were officers of the law and paid to do it. Maybe, he thought, I'm going crazy too.

Possibly, though, it was because at last they were men, like himself, and capable of accepting and returning violence on a reciprocal plane no higher and no lower than his own, and he wanted to fight them if they would. He had been struggling too long, infuriated, raging, and impotent, against the unconquerable and the intangible, trying to come to grips with and defend himself against an unbeatable and overwhelming river, a half-demented old man, and a bitch.

In the dismal rain of afternoon the straining levee held, while the water grew and waited.

* * *

For no other reason than that you went on living until you had to die, you went on walking until you had to fall for the last time. There was no sense to it; it was utterly without reason. A thousand miles back the world consisted of nausea and retching sickness, unnumbered incalculable millions of identical wet, black, pain-distorted tree trunks, a knee-deep highway of leaf-surfaced unmoving dirty water, and the eternal gray dreariness of rain, and a thousand miles ahead it would be exactly the same. You could fall for the last time here in this spot, or you could stagger on through this agonized and unvarying hell for another mile, and the difference in distance and time would be no more discernible here than the same mile and the same elapsed period of time measured, after you dropped, against all infinity and eternity.

Some critical and still lucid portion of Sewell's mind examined this phenomenon with curiosity. I was born and raised in this bottom, he thought, and I lived in it for twenty-one years, fishing for catfish and white perch and hunting coons in it, and I know every bit of it, but now it all looks the same. Maybe I'm already dead and don't know it. Maybe this is hell and I'll see Harve again and can wait here for Joy. Maybe it's just that everything looks funny now because of the poison, or the pain. I never knew pin oaks and white oaks to look like that before, all the same and all black, and swollen up like that.

Here's your picture, I'd have said, Harve don't need it no more, and maybe when you think about it I reckon he never did because what do you need the picture for if you've got the bitch it was took of? It's too bad you won't be around long enough to give it to somebody else, which was Harve's trouble too, but anyway, when they come in here after you begin to stink, and find it stuck in your mouth like that, they can pass it around and show it to their friends, if they got friends. And they ought to have lots of friends, with a picture like that. I guess you made a lot of 'em with it, and got made by 'em, till you run into Harve's trouble. Anyway, you still got both hands, and a picture in your mouth, which is more than Harve's got.

What the hell am I muttering about? he thought, his mind becoming clear again. I sound like some high-school punk telling what he'd have done if he'd caught up with the other guy. I didn't find her. I had a whole week and I didn't find her, so why go on about it? Forget it. Maybe I'd like to have a boat to go down the river in, one of them shiny glassed-in ones like I used to see in Galveston with a guy in a white coat going around serving drinks. I got as much chance of that as I have now of finding her, so why don't I wish for it too?

The hand and the wrist were badly swollen and darkened now, and he supposed the whole arm was too, but there was no way he could tell inside the coat sleeve. The arm was very painful, and would bend only with difficulty, and it seemed to be swelling out against the sleeve like an inflated inner tube inside a tire. The left arm was growing stiff from the flesh wound through the muscle of the forearm, and the shock had worn off now, leaving it excruciatingly painful. Periodically, the awful chills would sweep over him and leave him drenched in a cold and clammy perspiration, while his heart fluttered like a bird's. But it was the falling that was worst.

Suddenly and without warning he would find the whole river bottom tilting on end and flying up at him like the opening of a cellar door, and he would be wallowing in the muddy and leaf-congested water struggling to rise. After a passage of time that he was never able even to estimate, he would be back on his feet and staggering on. There'll be one of 'em pretty soon, he thought, when I won't get up.

Then he was on the beach at Galveston again with Joy, on their honeymoon, when she still thought he was a big-shot gambler and not a cheap purveyor of hired and professional violence. He would feel the great sea wind blowing and hear the booming of the surf at night, with his face in the fragrant loveliness of her hair.

I wonder if I've passed the farm yet, he thought. I seem to be on that side of the river and it's funny I wouldn't have recognized it if I'd gone by. Well, it don't make no difference. I wouldn't stop there.

Here's your picture. And this other thing's a gun. You ought to recognize a gun, but maybe you never saw that end of one before.

Twenty

It was midafternoon. The searching officers had come and gone, on into the bottom, and later Mitch had seen three of them come back out and go up the hill toward the house, where presumably they had left their cars. The other two, he supposed, had gone on up the river and would come out higher up, by the Jimerson place. Looking for a dead man on the bottom of the river, he thought bitterly, like a bunch of hungry turtles.

The river seemed to pause in its attack. For the past half hour the water level on the upper side of the levee had been almost at a standstill, and now it hung, poised, just below the top, like a toy balloon inflated to the bursting point. Was it the crest? Had it reached the peak, or was it merely resting, gathering its force for a new assault? If it'd just drop off a little, even a quarter of an inch, he thought, watching tensely, I'd know I held it. But if it comes up any more it's gone.

Like Sewell, he thought, the black despair reawakening and moving inside him like something cold but still alive in his stomach. But Sewell's been dead ever since he killed that deputy and butchered him up like that; he's just been borrowing time since then. He knew it, and I knew it, and I ought to be used to it by this time.

He turned, looking out across the rain-smeared bottom. Water was backing up into the field on the lower end, but there was no current in it and it was standing quietly in the furrows between the rows of cotton. If the river went back down before too long it would cause little damage.

His eyes swung back, and then suddenly stopped. A man had emerged from the edge of the timber out along the river, beyond the end of the levee, plowing along bareheaded and without a slicker, head down and lurching drunkenly from side to side. That ain't one of them deputies, lie thought, and then the man fell and struggled weakly in the flood.

Before the man had hit the water he was running. Oh, my God, Mitch thought, lunging across the field. He came to the fence and slid through

between the strands of barbed wire, hearing the rip of torn overalls and feeling but not even noticing the wire raking into the flesh of his leg, and then he was splashing through the slowly moving discolored flood toward the weakly floundering man still fifty yards away in the rain. The water came up to his knees, slowing him down. And then Sewell had his head out of the water.

Mitch rushed up to him, panting, and tried to take his arm. Sewell, on his knees with his head down, felt the hands upon him and heard the splashing and tried to pull away. Mitch grabbed the collar of his coat and heaved mightily upward and Sewell came to his feet and stood, facing downriver, not knowing who it was. The gun was in his right-hand coat pocket and he wondered vaguely, with some far-off, detached portion of his mind, whether it would still fire even if he could get it out with the stiff, venom-swollen hand.

Then he turned, and they looked at each other for a long minute, the thin and hard-faced man in drowned overalls and shirt with his butter-colored hair plastered to his skull, and the bigger, heavy-shouldered one in the ruin of his city clothes, and neither of them showed any sign of emotion.

"We can't stand here in the open," Mitch said at last. "There's still some deputies down here looking for you."

"Not to the house," Sewell replied, swaying. He seemed to be having trouble keeping Mitch fixed in his gaze.

"No," Mitch said quietly. "Not to the house."

"Just in the trees. In the big, black trees. They got bigger since I was here."

Mitch looked at him piercingly. He's out of his head, he thought. They got him somewhere. "Where you hit?" he asked, keeping his voice quiet and steady. If I start going to pieces, he thought, I'll never get him out of here. "Where did they hit you?"

"In this arm," Sewell said dully. "Didn't hit the bone."

The right arm was hanging straight down out of sight beyond him and Mitch did not see it for a moment. He looked at the sickness in his brother's eyes and the white, ghastly, unhealthy pallor of his face and thought. Being shot through the arm didn't make him like that. They got him somewhere else he ain't talking about. But I got to get him out of here. We can't stand here in the open like a couple of damn fools talking about the crops. I got to

get him into the timber. For Christ's sake, I got to get him moving before somebody sees us or he falls in this water again.

He moved around to the other side of the swaying, precariously upright figure. "Put your arm across my neck," he said, and started to reach for the wrist to pick it up. Then he saw it, the obscenely swollen balloon-fingered travesty of a hand puffed blackly out of the end of the coat sleeve like an inner tube swelling out of a ruptured tire casing, and he felt his stomach turn over with the sickness of it. Snake, he thought wildly. Half the goddamned police in the state looking for him, and a snake got him. He spent twenty years in this river bottom living with 'em and then he gets back in it for half a day and one of 'em gets him. They couldn't have got him another time, when he could go to a doctor. It had to be today. It had to be now. Of all the dirty . . . But what the hell difference does it make? He couldn't get out of here no how. I got to stop this. I'm getting as flighty as an old woman. I got to get him into that timber. What's the matter with me?

It was Sewell who snapped him out of it. "What's the matter, kid? You getting sick?" he asked, and Mitch stiffened as if he had been sluiced with a pitcher of ice water. He looked at his brother's face and saw the cold, ferocious grin and the sardonic eyes watching him.

He's all right again, he thought. His mind was wandering, but it's all right now. He's the one with the poison in him and I'm acting like a kid or an old woman.

"Come on," he said, deadly calm now. He moved around to Sewell's left to keep from jarring the swollen arm, put his arm around Sewell's waist, and started walking. We don't dare go across the field, he thought. We got to go in above the levee, through that water, where we can stay in the trees.

They pushed through it in the gray and dismal crying of the rain. In places the water was up to their waists, and Sewell walked falteringly, several times almost falling before Mitch could steady him. Once the sickness came upon him and he bent over, retching, and tried to vomit. He had been sick so many times and for so long there was nothing to the vomiting except the dry and terrible retching.

After what seemed like an hour to Mitch they came to the end of the water and started up the incline going out of the bottom. He guided Sewell away from the trail to where, some hundred yards away, there lay the crown of a big oak he and Cass had felled for stovewood early in the spring.

Sewell fell to his knees and lay down back among the branches, out of sight of anyone going along the trail. Mitch sank down beside him and helped him to straighten out. Then he thought of the raincoat.

“Wait a minute,” he said hurriedly. He ran down into the field and came back with the coat, Spreading it across a pair of limbs, he made a sort of tent of it to break the rain. Then he sat down, with his head under the edge of the coat, his face dark and still as if chopped out of walnut.

He looked at the arm. “Moccasin?” he asked quietly.

Sewell lay with his head on a small limb, his face deathly white except for the brown splotches of the big freckles, and his body rigidly still save for the hurried and shallow breathing. He shook his head slightly.

“Rattler,” he said.

Oh, God, Mitch thought. It couldn’t have been worse, but now it is. God knows how many hours ago, and a rattler on top of that, instead of a moccasin.

“Where?” he asked, still with that same quietness, as if he held onto his emotions with the same tenacious and indomitable grimness with which he was trying to hold back the thought of his brother’s dying. “When?”

Sewell tried to raise the arm. “Twice,” he said faintly. “Once on the wrist and once on the hand. Little after daylight this morning.”

“Did you get any of the poison out?”

Again there was that faint shake of the head. “I didn’t have a knife to cut it with.”

Mitch sat quietly, avoiding his eyes. “You’ll be all right,” he said, knowing he was lying. There wasn’t one chance in a hundred, even for a specimen like Sewell.

The old sardonic gleam came momentarily into Sewell’s eyes. “Don’t give us that, kid,” he said with the pain showing under his voice. “We ain’t got time for any crap.”

Mitch started to break then, just once. “Look,” he said urgently, his voice very thin and harsh, “a doctor could still fix it. I’ll go up and get a wagon and send one of them goddamned deputies after a doctor.”

Sewell looked at him quietly. “Cut it out, kid.”

“For Christ’s sake, Sewell!”

“Knock it off. In the first place, it’s too late. In the second, if he could fix me up I’d go to the chair. I like it better here.”

Mitch looked down at the mud. He nodded his head slowly.

“You want to stay down here, then?” he asked. “That’s right.”

“All right,” Mitch said quietly.

They were both silent for several minutes, listening to the monotonous tattoo of the rain on the spread raincoat. Then Mitch said, “What about, if —?”

“Not if. When.”

“All right,” Mitch said. He always had to be tougher than anybody else, he thought. I guess being tough was the only religion he ever had. And I reckon it’s as good as any, if it lasts. Got help you, though, if it ever quits on you. “All right, then. When.”

Sewell looked at him. “You still got a shovel on this shirt-tail farm? Or has he sold that too?”

Twenty-one

Mitch nodded his head, and the thing was done.

There had always been a deep and unspoken understanding between them. So unlike in many ways, the one corrupt, professionally violent, and criminal, and the other with his bitter honesty and a sort of harsh and thorn-protected, inarticulate capacity for love, they had always been able to meet on this common ground of a hard and unflinching realism. Courage was a quality each recognized and respected in the other; perhaps it had been passed on to them by their mother as valor is said to be in the breeding of fighting bulls, or perhaps it had been forced upon them by long association with the pitiful contrast of their father's weakness. At any rate, they understood each other now, and nodded, glad there had to be no further talk.

For Sewell there was in it the final guarantee that he would never be taken alive to go to the electric chair, and the grisly humor of one last supreme victory over the forces of the law he hated. The five-hundred-dollar reward forever unclaimed by any money-hungry deputy and the forever unsolved mystery of his disappearance would constitute the farewell expression of contempt he would leave them. Mitch had enough insight into the working of his brother's mind to be aware of this, but for him the reasons were different, although they came to the same conclusion.

There was a proud, unbending strain of clannishness in him, clannishness in the true sense of love and loyalty to family, which excluded the law, or at least came first, before the law. If Sewell owed a debt to law and to society for his misdeeds—and Mitch was too honest to deny this—Sewell would have paid it when he died, as surely as if he had paid it on the gallows or in the electric chair, and with the payment of this debt what was left of Sewell or the memory of Sewell was no longer society's concern. It was strictly a matter for his family. And since, besides himself, the family consisted of a half-demented old man who lived in a dream and a girl too young to understand and too vulnerable to grief, he would accept the full

responsibility. Damn the law now that the debt was being paid; it no longer had any concern in the matter. Damn the radio and newspapers, the publicity, the tumult, and the money-hungry scramble for reward. There had been enough of Roman carnival. It could end here in a hidden grave on this remaining and pitiful remnant of the land the Neelys still possessed.

He crouched now, wooden-faced, quiet, unwinking, below the edge of the sheltering raincoat and looked at Sewell, half ashamed of the weakness of his outburst a few minutes ago. There for a moment it had been hard to take, almost too hard, but now it was over and the grief was contained where it should be, below the surface and out of sight.

"How do you feel now?" he asked.

"O.K.," Sewell replied. They were both aware of the lie.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No. I wish I had a cigarette, but I reckon yours are ruined too."

"The tobacco's still dry. It's in a can. But the papers are wet."

"It don't matter."

"I'll run up to the house and get some more papers."

"Never mind," Sewell said.

"It won't take a minute."

He slid backward out of the dead tree and stood up in the rain. For a moment his gaze swung outward over the water backed up below him. What was it doing? Was it still rising, or had it reached the crest and begun to fall? Then he turned away; there was no time for it now. Just for an instant a great bitterness welled up in him. It seemed somehow that for a period of time that went back farther than he could remember—and was actually just since daybreak this morning—he had been caught up in one desperate and inconclusive struggle after another. First there had been the argument with Jessie, which he had had to abandon in a hopeless mess when he ran to fight the rising water trying to engulf the crop, and now in turn that was swallowed up in the larger disaster of Sewell. Maybe the old man's right, he thought. The thing to do is to find a world of your own. Then he shook it off and started up the hill toward the house.

* * *

The cars had been arriving and departing since mid-morning. Three of them had come and gone by now, and there was one still parked in the front yard while its two occupants searched the river bottom. As each arrived and began to disgorge its slickered, white-hatted men with rifles, Cass would leap up from beside the radio and run out into the rain in an antic frenzy of lamentation with the burlesque and monstrous hat athwart his head.

“He’s drowned,” he would wail. “It said on the radio He didn’t come up no more. I’m his daddy and I tried to raise him up a Christian, but he’s drowned in the river.”

“We don’t know,” the men would say. “And we don’t believe anything until we see it.”

“But it said so on the radio,” he would cry out, trotting after them as far as the barn and unable to grasp the fact that these men in the field were the ones who fed the information in the first place into radio’s all devouring gut and were uninterested in its digestive rumblings.

And then, as they left him, he would stand for a moment lost and uncertain in the rain and call out after them the repeated theme and password of his incipient madness: “I’m his daddy. He was my boy.” Whether this was a misguided bid for fame or the tortured admission of a sense of guilt they had no way of knowing—if they cared.

Joy sulked in her room and looked with contempt upon all this frenetic exhibitionism. I’m only his wife, she thought. Nobody cares enough to ask me how I feel. The silly old idiot, making a fool of himself like that. I think he’s going nuts. But you’d think somebody might have heard that he had a wife.

The last car, which had a press sticker on the windshield, rolled into the yard in midafternoon carrying two men, neither of whom had raincoats. They got out and ran up on the porch, one of them carrying a bulky camera case. The reporter was a lean-faced young man with closely cropped dark hair and alert gray eyes, and an air of eager impatience about him like a hunting dog on a frosty morning. The photographer was older, around forty, sloppily dressed in an old gray suit with food stains on the vest. The vest itself was closed with only one of its buttons, which was in the wrong buttonhole, causing it to extend down some two inches lower on one side than on the other. He was dark-haired too, but the hair was long, with a few strands of gray, and would never stay combed, springing up wildly on both

sides of the part and giving him a perpetual air of having just got out of bed. The face was gaunt, long-jawed, with cavernous eye sockets, and the eyes themselves were gray, with an expression of detached and somewhat cynical boredom. His name was Lambeth, and he was half drunk.

Cass was sitting on the bed in the front room listening to the radio when they arrived. Springing up, he ran into the hall and onto the front porch just as they leaped upon it from out of the rain.

"There's news coming in," he said excitedly, pausing only for an instant in his headlong orbit. "Got to listen to the news. I'll talk to you in a minute." Then he whirled and was gone, disappearing through the open window back into his room again.

They started, and looked at each other. They could hear the radio's voice inside the room.

"Looks like one of the listening audience," Lambeth said, unslinging the camera case and leaning boredly against the wall.

The reporter walked to the window and looked in. Cass was seated on the edge of the bed with his face pushed up in front of the radio, rapt, intent, unmoving, while the comic and improbable hat dripped water onto the floor.

"Are you Mr. Neely?" he asked.

"Can't talk to you now," Cass said, frowning.

The reporter withdrew his head, he stood still, listening and could hear the news.

"—no late developments in this sensational man hunt. Police officers at the scene are now almost unanimous in their opinion that Neely is dead, either drowned or killed by a rifle bullet at the time he was swimming down the river. However, the search is being pushed relentlessly and will not be written off as closed until the body is, recovered."

The reporter looked in again. "There's nothing new in that," he said. "I filed it myself less than an hour ago."

Cass looked at him blankly. "It's the news," he said. "Can't talk to you now."

"But I tell you," the reporter said impatiently, "there's nothing new in it. I wrote it."

Cass shook his head. "Don't make no difference."

The young man withdrew his head from the window and looked helplessly at Lambeth, who was leaning against the wall and wishing he had brought the bottle in from the car.

“Nobody ever believes anything until he hears it on the radio or sees it in the paper,” Lambeth said wearily. “God help the human race.”

“There must be somebody else around here we can talk to,” the reporter said. He started toward the door to look down the hall.

Joy had been in the bedroom engaged in changing into another dress when she heard the car drive up. But instead of going on down into the bottom as the others had done, these men had come up onto the porch. It’s about time somebody remembered he had a wife, she thought angrily. All this fuss and hullabaloo and that old cluck running around like a chicken with its head chopped off, and you’d think there wasn’t anybody else on the place or that had anything to do with Sewell at all. Slipping into a dressing gown, she gave her hair a shake back over her shoulders and went down the hall.

She emerged onto the porch just as the reporter was coming toward the door. He was quite attractive, she thought, and at the same time there was something vaguely familiar about him. She put on her best and warmest smile and started to say something.

Just then Lambeth heard her and turned.

“Well, well,” he said. “If it isn’t Narcissus.”

Twenty-two

“Oh, hello,” the reporter said. “You’re Mrs. Neely, aren’t you? You remember us, I guess. At the trial? We didn’t expect to see you out here, but I’m glad we ran into you.”

Joy smiled at them. “Why, yes,” she said. “I remember you, Mr.—er—”

“Shaw,” the younger man said. “And this is Byron Lambeth.”

“Oh, I know Mr. Lambeth. We’re old friends, aren’t we?”

“Mrs. Neely and I have seen a lot of each other,” Lambeth said gravely.

“Now, what would you like to say, Mrs. Neely?” Shaw asked with professional briskness. “Do you have any idea where your husband was headed when he—uh—”

“Well, I’m not sure,” she said slowly. “I hadn’t heard—”

“Don’t you think he might have been trying to come here?”

“Why, yes. I’ve thought of that. He *was* coming this way, wasn’t he? I mean, when he— Oh, it’s so awful! You don’t know what it’s been like all day, not knowing.” The idea of Sewell’s coming back to her began to blossom and take shape, and she knew. She just *knew*. Why hadn’t she realized it before? Why, of course. It really couldn’t have been anything else. He had been headed right this way, hadn’t he?

Forgetting the two men for a moment, she let her mind run unhampered along this delightful and beckoning pathway, seeing herself as the irresistible beauty for whom men would take incalculable risks. It happened all the time in the movies. And then, even as she was beginning to believe in herself as this fatal beauty, all the terrible tragedy of it came rushing in upon her and she fought to hold back the tears as she thought of how near he had been and she had not known. Sewell had been killed while risking everything just to be at her side for one final, beautiful hour, and she hadn’t known it until too late.

“Yes,” she said tragically, her face slightly raised like the pictures of Joan of Arc and a mist of tears in her eyes. “He was coming to see me. I can

feel it. It's something you know deep down inside of you. Oh, poor Sewell! To think how near he was and I didn't know."

Shaw broke in eagerly. "That's it! That's the way I see it. He must have been coming here. What else would he have been doing up there on that bridge? We'll cover it from that angle. And we'll want some pictures. You won't mind posing, will you, Mrs. Neely?"

"Mrs. Neely won't mind posing at all, I'm sure," Lambeth said with the same deferential and still half-drunken gravity. "Mrs. Neely takes a very good picture."

"I—I'll be glad to," Joy said graciously. She began dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, and looked down appraisingly at the dowdy old kimono. They would catch me in this crummy old rag, she thought. "Oh, but I'll have to change and fix up a little. I look such a fright. I haven't even bothered to—I mean, it's all been so horrible. It won't take a minute. You won't mind, will you?" She gave them a wan little smile, and before either of them could answer she had turned and run back down the hall.

Now, where's that confounded kid? she thought frantically, rushing into the bedroom and over to the suitcase on the old trunk. What'll I wear? Any other time she'd be underfoot like some idiotic puppy, mooning at me while I brush my hair, and now when I could use her she's nowhere around. Not a goddamned thing that's fit to be seen in, and the picture'll be in all the papers. Not that cheap, lousy print—it's wrinkled, anyway. A whore wouldn't be found dead in it. Just think, he was coming to see me. Wasn't that sweet? He just had to see me: he couldn't stay away. She threw the kimono on the bed.

She began to grab dresses up wildly until she had them all in her arms, and then threw them back into the suitcase in jumbled confusion. Oh, where the hell is that kid? I've got to have the mirror. And my lipstick. And I've got to comb my hair. She ran into the center of the room and stared wildly around in a sort of frenzied and helpless indecision. Where could she start? And what *could* she wear?

She ran out onto the back porch to get the mirror, in her frantic rush forgetting until after she was already out there, in the open, that she had taken off the kimono and had on nothing except her wisps of underthings. Oh, my God, she thought, I'm losing my mind. Snatching the mirror off its nail, she fled headlong back into the room. Suppose they'd seen me, she

thought. Not Lambeth, that stew bum. He's seen me in less than this. But the other one. Shaw, isn't it? He's cute. He'd have thought I was an awful hussy.

I hope that crazy Lambeth doesn't get the pictures mixed up and turn that other one in to the paper. Wouldn't that be a mess, when the editor saw it? And I wonder what Harve ever did with the one I gave him. I hope he didn't have it with him when he was—uh—when Sewell—er— Think of them finding it and a lot of strange people passing it around. Suppose Sewell had found it when he— God, that would have been terrible. But he didn't even know about it.

"Jessie! Jessie! Where are you, dear?" Oh, where *is* that lousy kid? If she thinks she's going to Houston with me, she'll have to be more help than this. What do I want with her, anyway? She'd just be a nuisance. I won't take her.

What am I talking about? Of *course* I'll take her. I don't care what she does afterward, but I'm going to take her. Didn't I see his face there this morning, on the porch? That got him, all right. The lousy bastard. That'll teach him who he can shove like that.

She propped the mirror up against a pillow and sat down on the bed to comb her hair. The mirror fell over, and she put her head in her arms, wanting to cry. Stop it, she thought. Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! I've got to get fixed lip. They're going to take my picture, and it'll be in all the papers. I've just got to look my best. I've just got to. I don't want to look like some old bag. Please! The story will say how he was coming back to see me, and people will look at the picture and say, "What was he going anywhere to see an old frump like that for?" Well. I'm *not* an old frump, and he was coming to see me. He was. I just know he was. Wasn't that sweet? All that worrying and stewing I've done about nothing, afraid I was losing my looks and getting old, when there wasn't anything to it at all.

She looked up then and saw Jessie standing in the door. The girl's childlike face, framed in the aureole of her tousled and rain-dampened hair, was burdened with an overpowering sadness, and the large blue eyes had no spark of their usual spirit and life.

"Oh, there you are, honey," Joy said, babbling, paying no attention to the other's heart-wrenching quiet. "Will you help me for a minute? Hold the mirror for me, will you? And see if you can find my lipstick."

Jessie came on into the room and took the mirror, her eyes still sad and now a little self-conscious as well, faintly embarrassed as always by the older woman's near nakedness. "What is it, Joy?" she asked dully.

"Reporters," Joy rattled on, full of excitement, pulling the comb through her hair in long sweeps back over her shoulders. "From some paper. They're going to take my picture, and write about us in the paper. Maybe they'll take yours too. I don't know what paper it is; I forgot to ask them. Maybe it's a Houston one. Say, you know what?" She paused in mid-stroke to look up with bubbling inspiration. "If they're from Houston, maybe they'll give us a ride. We can go back with them."

In spite of herself, Jessie began to feel some of Joy's excitement. "Do you think they'd let us?" she asked.

"Of *course*, honey. Certainly they would," Joy rambled on, by now fully convinced that Shaw and Lambeth were from Houston. The whole thing was an actuality, no longer even faintly conjectural. She possessed a great deal of Cass's happy facility in the art of making facts agree with her and for making up her own if necessary.

"We'll get a ride with them, and when we get to Houston we can stay with this friend of mine down there, the one named Dorothy, you remember, the one who's a model, only maybe she isn't modeling now, I don't know. I haven't heard from her for a long time. Maybe she isn't working as a model right at the moment, but that part doesn't matter. Anyway, we'll stay with her, she'd love to have us—she'd just love it, we're such great friends. We'll stay with her until we get jobs, and then we'll get our own apartment."

Jessie had caught onto her excitement for a moment and then had slid back, with the misery returning to her eyes. She tried desperately to listen, to follow every word, and to go along with Joy in appreciation of this enchanting vista, but her mind kept turning back to the brooding theme of her own unhappy thoughts.

"Joy," she asked now, suddenly, with a quiet and still-laced intensity, "do you think he had time to ask forgiveness?"

What on *earth* is she mumbling about? Joy thought. Christ, here I've been rattling on miles an hour and I thought she was listening. "Who had time to ask what?" she asked absently. "Baby, do you know where my lipstick is? I can't find my purse."

“It’s in your suitcase somewhere, I think,” Jessie said.

Let’s see, Joy was thinking. I’ll wear my nylons. I’ve only got one pair without runs, but this is important and if I’m careful they’ll be all right. I’ll have to have them on, it seems to me they always want to get your legs in the picture. I’ll wear that dress with the bows, it’s the only one that’s halfway decent. No. No, I can’t do that, damnit. It’s ruined, it’s all full of sand and it’s wrinkled. The last lousy, stinking thing I had that was fit to be found dead in, and now it’s ruined. That’s the one I had on when that stupid, ugly, mean-faced bastard pushed me. Well, he’s going to pay for that, all right. I’ll wear my white slippers with the French heels and the ankle straps; I think they’re clean. They’ll look nice in a picture, really smart.

Springing up, she ran over to the suitcase and began throwing dresses around again in a sort of despairing frenzy. “Jessie, Jessie, what *can* I put on? Help me, honey.”

Jessie followed her quietly. “Why not that white summer dress you had on this morning, Joy?”

“It’ll have to do, I guess.” She snatched it up frantically. Oh, why aren’t there any hangers around this awful dump? she thought. It’s all wrinkled. Well, it’s the only one. Hurriedly, she slipped into it, rummaged through the rat-nest confusion of the suitcase until she found her purse, and made up her face. Then there was another explosive upheaval among the powder-sifted brassieres, pants, dresses, handkerchiefs, and stockings while she matched the two remaining unsnagged nylons. She slowed down and put them on, very carefully, and slipped into the white shoes.

At last she was ready. She took one last look in the mirror and shook back her hair. Jessie followed her onto the porch, alternately caught up into the excitement of it and then slipping back into her own gray and lonely sadness.

Joy forgot to introduce the two strange men, and she stood quietly back out of the way. The man with the camera was fussing with its knobs and funny dials and taking light bulbs out of a leather bag. She wondered where he was going to plug them in, and thought with embarrassment of his finding out at the last minute that there wasn’t any electricity.

Maybe God would have forgiven him, Jessie thought, if he’d had time to ask. Maybe he did. Maybe the last thing he did on earth was to pray for forgiveness of his sins. It seemed so important, and she couldn’t understand

why Joy didn't wonder about it too. It must be more important than having your picture taken.

She wished she could ask Mitch about it. She had always consulted him about things like that, but now she couldn't because she didn't ever want to speak to him again. It was lonely, though, not having Mitch to ask about things.

Twenty-three

Mitch came up the trail past the barn walking fast in the rain, and went into the old smokehouse. He dried his hands on a shirt hanging on the wall and found the cigarette papers. I'll roll two or three while I'm here, he thought, and put 'em in a Prince Albert can with some dry matches. It'll be easier that way than trying to toll 'em in the rain.

Trying to force himself to be calm, he sat down on the box and set to work with tobacco and papers. His fingers were still too wet and the paper stuck to them and tore. Cursing, he got up and dried them again, and started over. Water ran out of his rain-soaked hair and spilled across the cigarette. He threw it away and tried again, holding it out and away from him. His fingers were shaking badly and he spilled more than half the tobacco, but he finally got one rolled and kept on until he had three more. Placing them in a can with some matches, he got up, ready to run back down the trail.

He ought to have more over him to keep off the rain than that old raincoat, he thought. Cotton sacks. I'll take a couple of cotton sacks. I got to have something when— Sick revulsion ran through him and left him weak and shaking, and he put the picture out of his mind. Just to put over him to keep off the rain while he smokes a cigarette, he thought, and ran to the barn. Snatching up two long canvas sacks, he rolled them into a tight bundle. He was ready to go.

He came out the door and then stopped, thinking suddenly of Jessie. I got to talk to her, he thought. I can spare a minute, just one minute, if I can get her away from that yellow-headed slut long enough to get a word in. Wheeling, he ran through the rain toward the house. There was no one in the kitchen and he stopped and looked around, spilling water onto the floor from his saturated clothing. He seemed to be running forever through some horrible dream, trying to catch up with something ahead or eternally fleeing from some disaster behind. He stared at the empty kitchen, aware that it caused him no surprise at all. There was a feeling in him that if everyone in

the house had suddenly evaporated like gasoline on a hot day or blown away like smoke there would no longer have been anything strange in it.

Then above the monotonous sound of the rain he could hear the radio in Cass's room, the soft, insidious, forever-flowing river of its exhortation and admonition as unstoppable as time and unavoidable as death, but knew he could accept this as no evidence the house was still inhabited. It just goes on forever like that river down in the bottom, he thought, and it ain't no wonder the old man can't make up his mind which one of 'em Sewell is drowned in. If you dropped it in a bucket of water it'd keep right on talking. He could see it now in his mind, lying unquenched, eternal, deathless, at the bottom of the bucket, the ceaseless outflowing of its word secretion unhalting and the words flowing up through the water in big bubbles like the balloon-encased conversations of comic strips.

There must be somebody here. Then there was a strange flash of light, or rather the reflection of a flash, sudden, sharp, incredibly fast, and gone. What the hell was that? he thought. Lightning? No. It was like lightning, but it wasn't. Then he heard voices somewhere in front, and he went down the hall with his leathery feet rasping, shup, shup, shup, against the time-worn pine to emerge upon the porch like some drowned cadaver walking up out of the sea into the midst of a beach party.

It was Joy's greatest hour. She lay reclined in the swing with her back against one arm and her long silken legs slightly raised and outstretched across it in the classic pose of all calendar art. The hemline of the short and frilly summer dress was carefully arranged across her knees while she awaited word from Lambeth as to whether he wanted more grief this time or more leg, and the reporter stood at the end of the swing taking notes on a small dime-store note pad.

"I won't even have to wait for authorization, Mrs. Neely," he was saying excitedly. "It'll be all right, I know. A hundred dollars. I'll write the story, under your name, of course. You just furnish the facts and I'll write it down. It'll be in the form of a first-person story of your life with Sewell Neely, how much you loved each other, your marriage, all the waiting here while you didn't know he was trying to come back to you, the tragedy, and all that stuff. And under your name, of course. By Joyce Neely, it'll say."

"A little more leg this lime," Lambeth said. He was squatted down near the door with camera and flash holder.

Joy looked up and saw Mitch standing there in the door, smiled triumphantly at him, and hiked the hemline of her dress another three inches for his benefit rather than Lambeth's.

"Hello, Mitch," she said sweetly. "These gentlemen are from the paper. They're going to give me and Jessie a lift, when they go back down to Houston tomorrow night."

Mitch took in all this grotesque Saturnalia of sickening cheapness in one terrible glance, seeing Jessie quietly watching from the edge of the porch near the step, and his mind swung back to the ballooning and discolored agony of Sewell's dying down there in the rain. He had no way of knowing that at least part of the sexy and heartless bitchiness of it was an act put on instantly, at this very moment, for his benefit alone, and felt nothing but the black wind blowing inside him as he started toward her. He had taken one step when, unknowingly, the reporter probably saved her life.

Looking up and seeing Mitch, he started forward. "Hello," he said eagerly. "I guess you're the brother. Mitchell, isn't it? Now, I wonder if we could get a statement from you? And a picture or two."

Mitch hit him in the face and he fell over backward into the swing against Joy's posed and silken legs while she screamed. A look of ineffable surprise and disbelief spread slowly over his face, and a trickle of blood ran down out of the corner of his mouth. Mitch whirled then on Lambeth, but the photographer had been through too many of these sudden melees to be caught napping and had swung aside, out of reach, with the camera protected against his stomach like the hidden football in a tricky backfield play.

"Stop it! Mitch, stop it!" Jessie cried out, and then he had her by the arm and was pulling her, protesting, after him down the hall.

"I want to talk to you," he heard himself saying above the roaring in his ears. "You hear me? You hear me?" he seemed to be repeating over and over. How long have I been saying that? he thought. "You listen to me, Jessie! You ain't going anywhere with that woman, tomorrow or no other day."

They were in the kitchen and she was beating on his arm with an outraged fist. "Turn me loose, Mitch! You're hurting my arm. And I don't want to talk to you. I don't want anything to do with you. I'm going with Joy. You're acting like a crazy man."

He released her wrist and moved to take both of her arms in his hands to shake some sense into her, to tell her, to make her understand. Christ, I got to make her see, he thought in some far-off detached portion of his mind that was still calm in the midst of all this madness. I got to make her see. The cotton sacks dropped from under his left arm and unrolled across the floor just as Cass came running out of his room.

“Turn me loose, Mitch!” Jessie screamed.

He felt the hand then upon his own arm and turned to see Cass standing there, and he thought. Does he think he has to keep me from hurting Jessie? Would I hurt Jessie? Am I hurting her? But Cass was paying no attention to Jessie at all. From under the soggy and impossible hat he was looking in a sort of calm bewilderment at the long canvas sacks unrolled across the floor.

“What you doing with them cotton sacks, Mitch? You can’t pick cotton in the rain.”

Mitch stopped then, releasing Jessie, and stepped back to stand stock-still for a minute in the suddenly quiet room where there was no sound now but his own breathing and the drumming monotony of the rain. Oh, my God, he thought, the words going around and around in his mind like a drunken and insanely spinning carousel in a bad dream. You can’t pick cotton in the rain. You can’t pick cotton in the rain. You can’t . . . We got no cotton. It’s June and we haven’t got no cotton and we likely won’t ever have none when the river gets through with it and he just stands there and tells me we can’t pick it in the rain. I got to get out of here. I got to get back to Sewell. What am I standing here for? He had to run, to get out of the kitchen before it closed in on him and strangled him. Snatching up the sacks, he fled out the door and down the trail past the barn.

Cass stood looking after him for a moment until he had gone out of sight around the corner of the barn. Then he went over and sat down at the table. He oughtn’t to be doing that, he thought. “A boy twenty-some-odd years old and raising cotton all his life and with me telling him how to do it all these years ought to know better. You just can’t do it. It’s foolish. It rots it.”

“It rots what?” Jessie asked, staring at him.

He looked around, surprised. He had forgotten she was there, and hadn’t had any idea he was speaking aloud.

“Rots the cotton,” he said with waspish impatience. Even Jessie ought to know that. It was something anybody would know that had ever been anywhere near a cotton farm. “You pick it while it’s wet like that and it rots.”

Jessie continued to stare at him, feeling some of the horror that had taken hold of Mitch.

“He’s not picking cotton,” she cried out. “This is June and there isn’t any cotton.”

“Then what was he doing with cotton sacks?” he asked logically. “That’s what you do with cotton sacks. You put cotton in ‘em. You don’t do nothing else with ‘em. That’s all they’re for.”

But before she could think of any answer he suddenly remembered the terrible thing about Sewell, and the awful knowledge came home to him that nobody had ever told Mitch about it. All this launching around and everybody running around like chickens with their heads chopped off, taking pictures and shaking each other, and nobody had ever said a word about it to Mitch, he thought piteously. That’s the reason he’s going down there in the bottom just going to work like nothing had happened. He don’t even know about it. He don’t know Sewell is drowned in the river. I got to tell him.

He ran out the door, but Mitch was already out of sight. I’ll follow him down in the field, he thought, and tell him. But it seems to me like I was already down there once today. And wasn’t Mitch building a dam? But what would he want cotton sacks for, if he was building a dam?

Twenty-four

Mitch plunged down the trail and cut off to the right toward the old treetop. As he made the turn he swept the backed-up water below him with a quick and searching glance. There was no way of telling whether it was rising now or falling, but the water was still, with no current through it, which meant the levee was still holding. Far out through the trees and the dismal grief of the rain he could see the muddy sweep of the current along the main channel, swinging in the wide bend and pushing water out over the flat and then completing the swing to flow on south past and beyond the edge of the field. It's holding, he thought. I wish I had a minute to go down there and look at it. I could tell whether it was going up or falling. But there ain't time. I been gone too long now.

Sewell lay on his back in the same position, unmoving except for the shallow, rapid rise and fall of his breathing. His eyes were closed. When Mitch came up and squatted down to look in under the edge of the raincoat he opened them, but for an instant there was no recognition in them at all. They were sick, and dull with pain, and now he seemed to be trying to move the swollen arm. Mitch had no way of knowing that he was trying to get the gun out of his pocket, the instincts and reflexes of all those years of living with violence and by violence still afloat and surviving even as the body itself was drowning in its sea of pain. Then the eyes cleared a little and a faint touch of the old sardonic humor came back into them.

"Hello, kid," he said weakly. "You look like a drowned rat. Where you been?"

"I got some cigarettes," Mitch said. He unrolled the cotton sacks and carefully dried his brother's face and left hand, not touching the right at all, then laid both sacks across the branches above them for additional shelter.

He squatted down again and reached up to dry his own hands against the underside of the sacks above them. Then he shook a cigarette out of the can

and placed it in his brother's mouth, raked a match head with a thumbnail, and lit it.

"Ain't you going to have one?" Sewell asked, inhaling, and then he moved his left hand up to take the cigarette between his fingers.

Mitch shook his head silently.

"You see any cops up there?" Sewell asked, his mind very clear now. He had no idea how long Mitch had been gone. He had been lying here for days, or maybe it was only minutes; time had no meaning any more, it was crazy and made no sense. It was like a strange and unpredictable river, lingering interminably in some dark and turgid pool where there was no light or movement or flow, and then plunging headlong into the millrace of some sunlit chasm where everything was clear and very sharply seen but going past at incredible speed. For long periods he wouldn't even be here at all. He would be back in Dorothy's apartment listening to the motorcycles in the early morning or fleeing endlessly along a darkened highway in the rain with a siren wailing behind him. Then he would come back out of it and Mitch would be here, or he would be gone. Mitch was hard to hold onto.

Mitch shook his head again. "There's still one car up there. I didn't see 'em, though. They're probably up the river."

He said nothing about the men from the newspaper. The whole scene up there on the porch, the grotesque cheapness and cruelty of it, made him sick when he thought about it, and he pushed it out of his mind. All she was thinking about was getting her goddamned picture in the paper, he thought, and now she's going to get a hundred dollars out of it on top of that for some lousy bunch of lies. It's too bad there ain't some way she could get the reward money, too, so she could make a good profit while she's at it. I'm glad, though, that that dude with the notebook stepped up when he did, because I might have killed her if I'd got my hands on her and started. I lost my head, I reckon. The same way I did with Jessie. Or not the same way, either, but I lost my head. I just made things worse again. Every time I try to talk to Jessie I just ball it up worse. I don't know why the hell I can't talk to her calm and reasonable, instead of losing my head and starting to shake her or something. I reckon I get too scared thinking about it and then start to go wild. I got to stop that. If it ain't too late. . . . Tomorrow night, she said. I got to talk to Jessie, but next time I'll keep my head.

Water started to drip in on them again and he looked up. Them damn sacks are leaking, he thought. I got to straighten 'em out. He backed out and straightened up, then whirled around in despair as he heard Cass's voice crying his name.

"Mitch! Mitch, it's Sewell," the old man was shouting, turning off the trail and running toward him.

Oh, God, Mitch thought, there ain't any way I can keep him away from here now. He's seen me, and the sacks, and he'll find Sewell, and his yowling and screaming'll bring every damned cop in the county.

He turned and ran toward Cass, trying to head him off. "What you yelling about?" he demanded.

"It's Sewell," Cass said, still stumbling forward through the underbrush, and raising one arm to point outward toward the river. "It's Sewell. Just come over the radio."

Mitch stopped, recognizing the identical gesture and the repeated words, the whole thing like the second playing of a phonograph record or a motion-picture reel being rerun. We're going to go through that whole thing again, he thought with horror. He's forgot he told me once already and he's going to do it all over, or else he's heard it on the radio again on a different station and thinks Sewell drowns all over again every time they say it.

"Stop yelling!" he commanded harshly. I got to shut him up some way, he thought.

Cass came up to him but could not stop, and continued to pace up and down as he had before. If he takes off that silly hat and wrings it out, Mitch thought, I'll go crazy and jump in the river. I can't stand no more.

"It's Sewell," Cass said wildly. "He's out there in the river." And then, suddenly, he stopped, thinking, I done all this before and Mitch was building a dam, but this time he's got cotton sacks hung up like a tent in that windfall. I done all of this before and Mitch knows about it but he's so hardhearted he kept right on working on his dam even when he knew my boy was drowned in the river.

He had ceased his pacing and Mitch watched him stare at the cotton sacks and then turn to look at him with that same baffled wonder like an imbecile child lost and forlorn in the rain. "What you got under them sacks, Mitch? What you doing?" he started to say, and then the wildness came into

his eyes and he whirled and ran toward the tree, crying out, "Sewell! Sewell!"

He was throwing the sacks back and kneeling blindly in his haste as Mitch leaped after him, very near the border line of panic and shouting now himself.

"Don't touch him! Goddammit, *don't touch him!* Don't touch his arm. Leave him alone!"

He got his hands on the old man's shaking body and held him just as Sewell opened his eyes again and looked up at them.

"What's all this racket?" he asked angrily, not recognizing them at first. Then he saw the weeping Cass held back and restrained just beyond his legs. "What the hell's he doing here? Is this a party?"

"What's the matter with his arm, Mitch? What's happened to his arm?" Cass was asking over and over.

"He's been snake-bit," Mitch said roughly. "A rattler bit him."

"Have you called a doctor? We got to get the wagon and get him out of here. Go get the wagon. Oh, my poor boy!"

"For Christ's sake, make him shut up," Sewell said brutally. "He's making more noise than an old woman. He'll have the whole county down here."

Mitch shook him, not wanting to do it, but knowing he had to get the noise stopped some way. "Shut up," he said savagely. "Shut up! There's men down here in the bottom looking for him."

"But he's been snake-bit," Cass cried out, struggling. "We got to get him to a doctor."

Ain't there no way I can make him understand? Mitch thought with desperation. "We can't take him to a doctor. It wouldn't do no good nohow. Do you want Jessie to see him like that? Do you want to turn him over to the law? Ain't you had enough of that damned circus?"

"Tell him to shut up and mind his own business," Sewell said coldly.

"You want them money-hungry bastards getting hold of him?" Mitch asked roughly. "You want that woman to go on making a side show out of it, like her husband getting killed was just for her benefit so she could get her picture in the paper?"

"Snake-bit! I tell you he's been snake-bit," Cass was still saying wildly, not hearing one word he had said.

Sewell had grown deadly quiet. "What's that, Mitch? Who did you say?" he asked softly.

"Joy," Mitch said, his face dark. "I don't care if she is your wife, she ain't going to make no circus . . ." Then he stopped, realizing for the first time that Sewell probably didn't even know she was here. "She's been here about a month. She's up there at the house now with them men from the paper, making a circus out of it."

"We got to get the wagon, Mitch," Cass cried out again. "Can't you see —"

"Shut up," Mitch commanded, feeling sick. It would have been all right, he thought, with just the two of us. We could have stood it. and there wouldn't have been no fuss to get you started. It would have been all right if he hadn't come along and started crying. "Shut up! We ain't going to get no wagon."

"Mitch, wait a minute," Sewell said, speaking with great difficulty. "Maybe you better—"

"What?" Mitch asked, puzzled.

Sewell's eyes were closed and he lay very still. "I'm getting awful sick," he said faintly. "I'm afraid of it. I-I thought I could pull through, but I don't know."

Mitch stared at him. He must be out of his mind, he thought wildly. A doctor ain't going to do him no good.

"You want me to get the wagon and take you up to the house?" he asked, leaning very close.

"Yes," Sewell answered faintly. "It may be too late now. I'm afraid I'm going to die. Mitch, I—" He stopped, as if the effort were too great for him. Mitch waited, hardly breathing. "I—I don't want to die down here in the rain."

* * *

They were gone now. They had left hurriedly, running up the hill toward the house to harness the mules and bring the wagon down. Sewell lay very still for a minute, thinking. It's in my right-hand coat pocket and I got to get it out of there some way and into the left one. I can't use the right hand at all. I can't even move it.

So she was up there all the time and I didn't know it. Well, I ain't got no time to think about that. I ain't got much time left for anything. Get it out of the right-hand pocket and into the left one. And then maybe it won't even shoot. It's been in the water. But it's different from a shotgun. Shotgun shells will get wet, but this is solid ammunition, in brass cases, and it might still be dry inside. There ain't no way to tell till I get there. But I got to move the gun to where I can use it.

He raised his left arm and started swinging the hand across to fumble awkwardly with the coat pocket next to the swollen and immovable right arm, and then he was lying in the sand somewhere on a summer night with the surf running and Joy was just beyond him in the starlight, very lovely in her bathing suit. She turned her head to look at him, and disappeared, and a siren was wailing somewhere behind him while the windshield wipers were going swock-swock, swock-swock, with the wet pavement rushing and swooping endlessly back and past him through the dark-framed tunnel of light.

How long had they been gone? He had come back from somewhere far off and was lying there with his left arm across his chest. I got to hurry, he thought. I may have been out for half an hour. He twisted the hand into the pocket, bumping the right arm once and feeling a nauseating ocean of pain, and then he had hold of the gun and brought it out, I wonder if it'll shoot, he thought. Well, there's only one way to find out, and I will if I can hold on that long and don't blank out.

Twenty-five

Mitch reached the barn first and was feverishly throwing harness on the mules when Cass came puffing up and went on by, bent forward and holding onto the hat as if running into a gale.

"I found Sewell! I found him, I found him! I found my boy!" Mitch could hear him shouting from the depths of his grief or madness as he ran across the yard. Then he was gone inside the house.

There was instantaneous eruption. Mitch was whirling the team about before the wagon and thinking. What made him change his mind like that? What happened? Then Shaw and Lambeth came running around the side of the house followed closely by Jessie. There was no sign of Joy. Well, she wouldn't get her hair wet, Mitch thought, in some detached portion of his mind.

"What happened?" Shaw asked with wild excitement, bareheaded and oblivious of the rain. "We can't make any sense out of what he's saying."

I wouldn't think so. Mitch thought, ducking in behind the mules to fasten the trace chains. He's got it so mixed up in his own mind, the radio part of it and this part, that's he's probably gone in there now to listen to the radio to see if he can get straightened out himself.

He threw the lines into the wagon and turned to face them. "He's down there in the bottom," he said harshly. "I'm going after him in the wagon, but I got to have some help to get him in it. And one of you better go out on the highway and phone the damned sheriff's office and tell 'em to send an ambulance or a doctor. He's been snake-bit."

Jessie had run up now and she cried out in anguished accusation, "He said you had Sewell down there and wouldn't bring him to the doctor. He said you wouldn't bring him to the house."

"You get in out of the rain," Mitch said curtly.

She gave him a look of horror and turned, running back toward the kitchen. He looked after her once, then ran over to the old smokehouse and

came out carrying his cot. He went to the woodpile with it, and with a few savage swings of the ax he chopped the legs off to make a stretcher of it.

Throwing it into the wagon, he nodded to Lambeth and leaped up into it himself, while Shaw ran for the car to get to a telephone. As Mitch swung the team around and they started down the hill, Cass emerged from the kitchen and came after them, shouting frantically.

“Wait!” he called. “Wait for me!”

Mitch stopped the mules and held them, feeling a harsh and grating impatience as the old man climbed aboard. Cass sat down on the rough plank across the wagon bed and faced forward into the rain, staring straight ahead.

“Let’s go,” he said in the dead and bankrupt calm that is beyond frenzy. “I got to bring my boy in.”

The wagon swung downward through the darkening timber. It’s getting late, Mitch thought, aware of a faint surprise that this day might end, might have twilight and then cease to be, like other days. It had run on through the span of a lifetime and he had come to accept it as something eternal that would go on and on as long as he could keep running forward without progress across the endless revolving belt of its hours. It’s getting late and he may be dead when we get there. He’s had that poison in him all day.

What made him get scared all of a sudden like that? Being tough is Sewell’s religion, if he has one, and he’s known all day he’s going to die. It was right after I said she was up here; was that just his way of saying he wanted to see her, to be with her when he died? Or can being tough just quit on you like that when you need it worst?

The water was still backed up, unmoving, below the foot of the hill. He glanced at it once, briefly, read it with only half his mind, and forgot it. The fight to save their crop was a thing long past, almost forgotten, and unimportant now.

He leaped down from the wagon bed and wondered if he were really hanging in the air, unable even to fall toward the ground. Sewell lay as he had, with his eyes closed. He knelt beside the still and white-faced figure, feeling for the pulse. It was still there, rapid, faint, and fluttery, like the heartbeat of a captured bird.

Cass was wailing again, beside him. “I got to take my boy in. I lound him. and I got to take him in!”

“Shut Up,” Mitch said, without anger, without even hope that the noise would cease.

He and Lambeth worked Sewell onto the legless, stretched canvas of the cot, and lifted him into the wagon, being as gentle and careful as they could with the poisoned arm. He grabbed up the sacks and the raincoat and threw them across the box of the wagon to keep off the rain. Then they were going up the hill.

Sewell felt the wagon begin to move, and thought. It ain’t much longer now. The trail goes left, then right on a switchback turn, and there’s an oak the lightning struck, and it runs past the end of the hillside field, going up. I saw a fox there, with a chicken in its mouth, one morning going after the cows. There’s a plum thicket beyond the end of the rows and a long time later, after the fox, the fat girl from somewhere, picking cotton, said, “You know there ain’t no plums in October, you dog,” and laughed, and from there you can see the barn, in winter when the leaves are gone. It’s funny how clear you can remember all of that. I hardly even thought of it for seven years. It ain’t much farther, we already made the second turn, and all I got to do is hold on a little longer. Then he was whirling through darkness and the siren was closer now.

Joy and Jessie were watching from the kitchen door as they made the turn around the barn and came across the yard. I didn’t want her to see it, Mitch thought. It ain’t a pretty sight.

Shaw was back. He came leaping off the front porch as Mitch stopped the team in the front yard and jumped down from the wheel. “I found the phone,” he said. “Ambulance should be here in a few minutes with the sheriff’s men.”

“Don’t touch him,” Mitch said bleakly. “Don’t try to move him. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He jumped up on the porch as Jessie came through the door. “You stay inside till I tell you,” he commanded. She stopped, and he turned away from her and went into Cass’s room through the window. Cass had forgotten to turn off the radio, and soft music issued from its loudspeaker. He stared at it silently, for some reason wanting to pick up a chair and smash it, but went on past and began to tear at the bed.

He rolled up the mattress and a quilt and threw them through the window onto the porch in front of the swing. Going back out into the yard,

he motioned to Lambeth and Shaw, and the three of them slid the stretcher out of the wagon and carried it to the porch. They slid Sewell carefully off it onto the mattress and pulled the quilt up to his chin. He had not moved or opened his eyes.

I know exactly where I'm lying, Sewell thought, listening for the sound of her voice.

Mitch wanted to quit now, and he had to sit down. He went back to the end of the porch near the door and squatted down, staring silently at the others. Everything was gone out of him. I'm empty, he thought. I'm just hollow, like a log. There ain't anything I can do for him now. I can't even talk to him in front of all these people. Jessie came out of the doorway and went up to Sewell. She knelt beside him for an instant and then got up, going past him quickly and through the door with her face screwed up tight but not crying. She went into the bedroom and he wanted to follow her. I'll talk to her in a minute, he thought. In a minute, as soon as I can think.

Cass went past crying, "I found him! I found my boy!" and bent forward at right angles like a jackknife to step through the window into his room. Mitch heard the corrugated washboard of sound from the radio as the dial spun and thought. He wants to find out if he really did find Sewell. He won't believe it till he hears it.

Shaw was talking eagerly to Lambeth, who was drying his hands on a towel and unpacking the camera again. "I phoned it in, when I was out on the highway to call for the ambulance. So here's what we do now. We want a few more pics, maybe three or four more. One or two of Neely, and then one when the ambulance gets here. And one of Mrs. Neely kneeling down beside her husband. Then we're going to scram. She's going with us. I can get the rest of her story while you drive, and we'll be in town in time for me to write the story and beat the deadline with about thirty seconds to spare. You all set?"

Lambeth nodded. "Where's Narcissus?"

"She's packing."

It broke across Mitch's numb tiredness like a sea of ice water. He sprang to his feet and started down the hall. They weren't going tomorrow. They were going today, now, in a few minutes. He met Joy in the hall and she gave him a glance of pure malice as she went by. Going to have her picture took, he thought with contempt, lunging at the door of the bedroom.

Jessie was folding her few dresses and an old sweater and putting them into a cardboard box. She looked up as he came in and the glance swept on past him, unseeing.

He stopped. "Jessie," he said. His voice sounded very far away.

She gave no sign she had heard him.

"Jessie," he said again, coming into the room. "Jessie! Listen to me. You ain't going with that—" He put a hand on her arm and she pulled away with that stony-faced yet almost imperceptible withdrawal that can be one of the most devastating things on earth and compared to which all male violence of blow and insult is utterly harmless.

I won't lose my head this time, he thought, beginning even then to lose it. The wild anger and the fright were coming up in him and he started to shake her arm. She offered no resistance whatever, merely standing there and looking at him without seeing him, and when he got hold of himself and stopped she picked up the box and went past him out of the room.

He went out onto the porch and Jessie was holding the box and watching still-faced while Lambeth adjusted the camera. I can hold her when they leave, he thought in the blackness of despair, but she'll just run away later on.

"Now, Mrs. Neely," Shaw was saying.

"All right," Joy said. She started toward the mattress where Sewell lay, next to the swing.

Sewell looked so white lying there like that and she was almost afraid. Her grief was not entirely simulated. She was really sorry for him now, and it was so sad to think of how he had been trying so hard to get back to her when she didn't know it, and to have him get bitten by that awful snake when he was almost here—it was so terrible. She felt a genuine sorrow as she walked toward him; it was just that she was still practical enough to remember camera angles and the way she would look best in the picture at the same time she was so lull of her grief.

It would be best, since Lambeth was on her left, to have most of her hair swing down on the right side of her face as she bent down, with just enough on the left to frame it. And they wouldn't want any legs in this pose of a wife grieving for her husband; she must be very demure about the legs, with just enough showing so it would be possible to see that they *were* nice. She halted, and started to kneel beside his shoulders.

I can hear her, Sewell thought. His mind had been going away from him on those long, dark journeys and then swinging back like a pendulum, but it was very clear now with only the pain to bother him and he knew it would all be quite sharp and clean when he opened his eyes. He had his hand on the gun under the quilt and lay quietly listening to her footsteps as she came toward him. I won't have to open my eyes to know when she's bending down, he thought. I'll smell her; you can always smell her when she's close.

The others had fallen silent, watching the tableau. Jessie looked on with a lump in her throat, thinking how sad it was and how sweet Joy looked in her grief. Mitch watched with contempt and a cold, hard anger, sickened as he had been before by the cheap, self-seeking heartlessness of it. But still, he thought, why did Sewell change like that when he found out she was up here? If that was what Sewell wanted . . .

Joy bent down. She felt she was going to cry, but remembered to turn her head just a little more to the left. Tendrils of golden blonde hair brushed Sewell's cheek, and he started to open his eyes and bring the hand with the gun out from under the quilt.

Then it started to go. He fought it but could not hold it off as the blackness came for him again. The sound of the rain on the sheet-metal roof was the running of surf and Joy was leaning over him with her hair a gleaming cascade of loveliness in the starlight.

Just as they heard the sound of the ambulance coming down the sandy ruts of the hill, he brought the hand out from under the quilt, empty, and put it up to touch her.

"Joy," he said.

She bent down and kissed him and the flash bulb went off. The picture was taken, and she turned her head and smiled at all of them through her tears.

Twenty-six

It made her feel so wonderful and at the same time so sort of sad. It was tragic about Sewell because she knew he was dying, but everybody had seen it and the touching gesture of his love for her was even snapped into the picture now where she would always have it.

It gave back to her the feeling of being wanted and admired and would drive away for years that terror of her nights, the agonizing hell of doubt and the fear of glowing old and ugly that came to taunt her in the darkness. There was a great uplifting of her spirit, and she didn't even hate Mitch any more. Yes, I do, she thought, looking at him; nothing could rub that out, but it just doesn't matter so much now.

She looked at Jessie standing by the door with the box under her arm. I don't want to take her with me, she thought. What business have I got with a kid like that? I don't want to be bothered with her; she'd just be in my way. And I couldn't just go off and leave her somewhere—I guess I'm not bitch enough for that, am I? I'll tell her. I'll tell her she can't go.

Nobody had said anything for a minute. They could hear the car coming quite plainly now, running down the sandy road through the pines just above the yard. It sounded as if there were two cars, and they knew one of them would be the ambulance.

Mitch sat on his heels staring bleakly out at the rain. There ain't nothing I can do now, he thought. They'll be gone in a few minutes. I tried, but it was too much for me. I can't stop it now.

Joy started to get up, but Lambeth motioned to her. "Just one more," he said. "That's probably the ambulance now, and we've just time for one more before they get here."

"All right." Joy assented graciously.

She had been looking at the four people on the other end of the porch, and now she started to turn her face back and downward toward Sewell. There was a slight movement of the edge of the quilt. Mitch saw it, and

Shaw, and even Jessie, before she did, but there was nothing they could do. It was too late.

She bent down and turned her head, and then she was looking into the cold eyes and the round, black, awful end of the gun. Time stopped and all sound ceased, and there was nothing anywhere except Sewell slowly raising himself up on the mattress with his back against the upright post at the edge of the porch, his face sweating with agony but as pitiless as death itself.

“Reach your hand in my coat pocket, baby,” he said softly. “Harve sent you a present.”

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out of it. Mitch and Shaw started to get up to leap toward them, but the gun swung and the cold eyes stopped them where they were. They hung, half crouched and hardly daring to breathe. Jessie’s face was still with horror as she stood there by the door. All of them except Joy could hear the cars coming, very near now and about to turn into the yard.

“Go on,” he said again. “In my pocket. Harve didn’t need it no more, so I brought it back to you.”

No. Joy could feel her mouth forming the word, but there was no word. No! No! No! was a pressure growing greater and more terrible inside her and straining outward toward the vacuum of silence waiting to receive it, trying to escape through that invisible barrier in her throat beyond which nothing would pass.

“Go on, baby. See what your boy friend sent you. Harve, the one-handed joker.”

It was a nightmare across which she moved without volition. Her hand was going into the coat pocket. There was nothing she could do to stop it. It came out holding the photograph and the four people beyond her saw it as they waited, frozen and utterly without motion, while the ambulance and the sheriff’s car turned into the yard.

Sewell could feel the blackness coming for him again, and fought it back. All of them were beginning to swim before his eyes like water going around and around in a great dark eddy on the surface of a river as he tried to steady the gun. Mitch turned his head silently, staring. Men were getting out of the sheriff’s car, men with guns under their coats. They don’t know, he thought. They don’t know. They’ll never get here in time to stop him. He came to his feet, springing up and forward.

She was looking down at the picture in her hand with that awful feeling of her mouth going wider and wider without sound. Her eyes shifted and the muzzle of the gun was a black tunnel toward which she was walking in the nightmare, a tunnel that grew larger and then, as she ran into it, suddenly filled with light—a huge, bursting circle of light without end.

Mitch reached her as she wilted and fell forward across Sewell like a gold-petaled flower cut down by the scythe. Sewell was swinging outward into darkness again toward that dark beach and that brief period of time in which he had been happy with this girl now lying dead across his chest in a terrible and irrevocable wedding of the only two things he had ever loved: this same beautiful, lost, unhappy girl, and violence.

Jessie had screamed and then turned to run back down the hall toward the bedroom. Mitch stood on the edge of the porch, an island of immobility, helpless, numb, and lost, in the swirling river of motion going across the porch and into the yard.

The sheriff was cursing, monotonously and with a kind of helpless bitterness. “Not a goddamned one of the whole dumbheaded bunch of idiots with brains enough to look to see if he had a gun. You must have thought he was some Sunday-school kid playing hookey from school. This girl’d have been alive now if any one of you’d had sense enough to come in out of the rain.”

They were putting Joy’s body into the ambulance and then coming back for Sewell. The young doctor squatted beside the mattress, and when he looked up and saw Mitch’s eyes on him he gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head and looked away.

”You got all the pics you need?” Shaw was asking Lambeth. “Let’s roll. My God! Did you ever see anything like it?”

”Shut up,” Lambeth said tonelessly, stowing the camera in its case. Did I kill her? he thought. Was it Harve? Did Neely do it, or was he just the weapon, the instrument, the actual hand on the gun? Was it all of us, each in his way, or if you went back far enough could you say she did it herself? When we get started, I’ll finish that bottle. This is one time I need it.

And then, suddenly, they were all gone. The yard was empty except for the team, standing dejectedly in the diminishing drizzle of the rain. Cass had gone running across the yard and pushed his way into the front seat of the departing ambulance, oblivious of restraint and crying out his unvarying

and frenzied lamentation, "I'm his daddy. I found my boy, and I got to take him in." When the ambulance shot out of the yard he was seated beside the driver, staring straight ahead through the windshield and holding onto the dripping and grotesque hat. The other car, with the sheriff and his two deputies, was right behind it, and in a moment Shaw and Lambeth got into (heir car and left.

Mitch squatted on his heels, staring out into the yard. He'll be dead before they get to town with him, he thought. I saw that doctor shake his head, and he knew that I knew it. He killed her, and that was all he was holding on for, I reckon, ever since he found out she was up here. All the good the old man did with his crying and taking on was to get that girl killed. God knows, I never had much use for her, but it was an awful thing to happen.

The picture had been forgotten in all the excitement, and now he saw it lying upside down on the edge of the quilt, Reaching out a hand, he turned it over, looked at it a minute, then turned it back. This is what killed her, he thought. It ain't nothing but just a picture of her without no clothes on, like them artists' models, but it killed her. I reckon that deputy had it on him and Sewell found it. And now I got to tell Jessie. I'd rather die right here on the porch, I reckon, than do it. First she lost Sewell, and then Mexico, and now she figures I ain't no good, so Joy was about all the people she had left. She thought Joy was the only thing there was. It don't make so much difference, now that Joy's dead and she can't go away with her, but still I got to tell her.

I've always taken care of her ever since I can remember, and I got to go on doing it until she's old enough to get married. And I can't do it if she's going to go on hating me for whatever she thinks I did to Joy. She'd run away. I just got to do it.

He picked up the picture and put it in his pocket, then got up and went slowly down the hall. It was growing darker inside the house now, and he realized it was almost twilight and he hadn't been back to the bottom to see if the levee still held. After a while, he thought. Maybe that's gone too.

He went reluctantly into the bedroom and stood looking down at her. She was lying on the bed with her face to the wall, making no sound of any kind. He knew she was not crying.

"Jessie," he said quietly, standing still beside the bed and dripping water out of his clothing onto the floor.

She said nothing, and gave no indication she had heard him.

"It ain't no use to feel so bad about it, Jessie," he said. "It couldn't be helped."

She still made no answer, lying there with her face to the wall as if he were not even in the room. He stood looking at her helplessly, full of pity for her and not knowing what to do. He pulled the picture out of his pocket and looked at it, wanting to cry out, "Look, Jessie, she wasn't worth anything. She wasn't worth feeling bad about," but he could not, and in a minute he went out of the room. I can't do it, he thought. No matter what she thinks, I can't do it. He tore the picture up and threw it into the firebox of the stove, then went down the trail toward the bottom.

The river was falling now. It had gone down nearly six inches, and the levee had held. Well, I saved that, anyway, he thought. But I reckon it don't make much difference now. He stood there for a minute, looking out over the muddy field. Yes, it does too. It always does. You can't just give up.

It was growing dark as he went back up the hill, and the rain had stopped. As he passed the barn he heard someone moving around inside and talking to the mules, and suddenly he remembered the team forgotten in the front yard.

"Who's that?" he called out.

"It's just me." Prentiss Jimerson came out, looking at him a little uneasily. "I reckon you ain't still sore at me, are you, Mitch?"

He stopped. "Sore at you? What for?" It must have been years since he had even seen Prentiss.

"You know—about Sewell, on the radio. You got mad at me."

"Oh," he said, suddenly remembering. "No. Of course not. It don't matter now."

"I saw the team out there, and thought maybe I'd unhitch and feed the stock for you. What with the trouble and all . . ."

Mitch stood still for a moment in the gathering darkness. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks, Prentiss. You had any supper yet?"

"Well, no. I was just on my way home."

"We'll see if we can fix something. Did you see Jessie?"

"Just for a minute." Prentiss stopped, and then went on with an awkward and embarrassed tenderness in his voice, "She's all tore up about it, Mitch."

“Yes,” Mitch said. “I know.” They went into the kitchen. Jessie had the lamps lighted and was starting to build a fire in the cookstove. She was putting paper into the firebox and stopped suddenly, reaching into it for the scraps of the picture. Mitch watched her holding them in her hand, and when she looked up and met his gaze he shook his head.

“It ain’t nothing, Jessie,” he said. “Burn it.”

She shook her head slowly and went on fitting the four pieces loosely together in the palm of her left hand. Then, abruptly, she changed her mind and dropped them back into the firebox with an infinite and defeated weariness and put a match to the paper.

Mitch looked at her, so small and beaten there in the lamplight, and felt the twisting of pity inside him. “Don’t take it so hard, Jessie,” he said. “It’ll be all right.”

Then, for the first time, she spoke. “She never had a chance! Nobody ever gave her a chance!” she cried out brokenly. “Sewell didn’t. And you—I hope you feel the way you ought to, after the things you did to her!”

“I didn’t, Jessie! I tell you, I didn’t do anything to her. Maybe she said I did, but you never did ask me!”

“Oh, stop it! When she’s dead now and can’t say anything—”

Mitch stopped, realizing the futility of it. Even if Jessie would believe him, it wasn’t a thing he would want to do.

They ate supper in silence, both the men watching Jessie anxiously but leaving her alone. Cass had not returned.

When Prentiss got up to leave, Mitch asked, “Where’s Cal?”

Prentiss looked embarrassed. “Why, at home, I reckon.”

“You tell him I want to see him.”

“All right,” Prentiss said hesitantly. “I’ll tell him.”

Mitch saw the doubt in his face. “I ain’t going to do anything. I just want to tell him something.”

“All right.”

After Jessie had gone to bed he walked the twelve miles to town in the dark. Sewell had died on the way to town, they said at the hospital, but they let him go in for a minute. Sewell’s face was very white except for the large brown freckles, and it looked peaceful and still now with all the violence gone. After a while he went back out and sat on the courthouse steps all

night smoking cigarettes and waiting for morning to find out about claiming the body for burial.

Nobody seemed to know what had become of Cass.

Twenty-seven

On the clay hillside, drying now and baking in the sun, they lowered the crude box into the ground. Jessie turned away as the first clods fell with their hollow sound, and walked silently through the small scattering of neighbors and the idly curious who had gathered for the funeral.

Mitch swung around and followed her, still-backed and austere in his clean, faded overalls, and helped her climb into the wagon. She said nothing, nor did he as he climbed up and took the lines. If she'd just cry, he thought. If she'd only cry, it would help her.

Joy's family had come from Louisiana to claim her body. Sewell's funeral was done now, and Cass had not come. Maybe he didn't know, Mitch thought. Wherever he is, maybe he didn't hear about it.

He gathered up the lines and prepared to shake the sad-eared and drowsing mules awake when Cal Jimerson walked over from the gathering.

"Maybe Jessie'd like to ride back with us in the car, Mitch," he said. "It's a long ride in the wagon."

Mitch turned to her. "You want to, Jessie?"

She shook her head. "I'll be all right," she said. "But thanks, Cal. It was nice of you."

"Thanks for offering," Mitch said. He continued to look down at Cal with his eyes stern, but said nothing.

The other's face began to redden under the scrutiny, "I hear you wanted to see me about something," he said lamely, with a touch of defiance in his voice.

"That's right," Mitch said. "This ain't the place for it, but I'll tell you anyway."

"All right," Cal said uncomfortably. "Let's have it."

"Don't you ever come on my place again when you're drunk. You boys are always welcome, but I ain't going to have any prowling around when

you're tanked up coming home from a dance. The next time you pull somebody out of a window it might be me."

Cal shifted his feet with embarrassment and his face grew darker. "I reckon I just had a little too much. It happens to people."

"Well, it's past and done. I ain't going to write no book about it. I just wanted it understood, then we'll drop it."

Cal looked up. "O.K., Mitch," he said. "It was too bad about Sewell."

"Yes," Mitch said. "But that's past and done too."

"That's right."

"I'll see you." Mitch gathered up the lines.

The mules leaned forward and the wheels turned, cutting the drying clay. Jessie sat very quietly beside him as they swung past the little church and started out toward the road.

"Mitch."

He turned. "What is it, Jessie?" She's growing up fast, he thought. She looks like a woman now, with her hair combed like that and wearing her Sunday dress.

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. And then the dam broke and all of it let go in her at once. He put the lines down in the wagon bed under his foot and held her while she cried. The mules swung out on the road and started toward home without guidance, forgotten while he supported the small, shaking body with his arm until all the storm had passed.

She straightened up after a while and he held out the clean bandanna. "Here, Jessie," he said gruffly, feeling the constriction in his throat and all the old inarticulate and thorn-protected love for her he would never be able to express in words. I reckon she knows, though, he thought.

"I—I guess I believed it, Mitch," she said hesitantly, "I don't know why."

"It's all right, Jessie. It don't make no difference now."

She was silent for a moment. "Why do you suppose she did it? Why, Mitch?"

"I don't know. But she's dead now. Let's don't talk about it."

Her shoulders shook just once more, while she twisted the handkerchief helplessly in her hands and cried out the ending of the whole chapter of Joy, "But she was nice, Mitch! I know better than you do. She tried awful hard. But she never did have a chance!"

Mitch said nothing. Maybe she's right, he thought. I guess I don't know nothing about 'em. I was worried about Jessie going off with her, but I reckon actually it wouldn't have made no difference. Jessie was more growed up when she was twelve, I reckon, than Joy was when she died.

The Jimersons went past, waving, and then the car stopped up ahead. Prentiss got out and they went on. When the wagon came up to where he was waiting beside the road, Mitch stopped the team and looked down at him. The youth was wearing his Sunday suit for the funeral, and now he looked up with the brown eyes slightly abashed as usual.

"You mind if I ride back with you, Mitch? I'd kind of like to ride in the wagon."

Mitch looked at him gravely. I reckon she is growing up, he thought.

"Sure," he said. "Go on around and climb in. I reckon we can make room, can't we, Jessie?"

* * *

Cass had not come home. He had run across the yard that tragic afternoon and pushed his way into the departing ambulance and then had disappeared. The funeral had come and gone without the man who had cried out so, piteously in his grief, and now, two days after the funeral, he still had not returned. When Mitch had gone to claim Sewell's body for burial, he had asked, but no one seemed to know anything about him. Yes, they said, he had come in to town in the ambulance, but as to where he was now, they couldn't say. Each time, the question had met with a puzzled glance and a quick changing of the subject, as if the person asked had not understood or did not want to say.

Mitch and Jessie sat on the front porch in the early evening resting after supper and watching the shadows thicken into dusk among the pines. Mitch had been cutting wood all day, waiting for the fields to dry out enough for plowing. The river was back to normal now, but it would be several days before he could do any work in the bottom.

"Where do you suppose he is, Mitch?" Jessie asked.

Mitch threw the cigarette into the yard. "I don't know, Jessie," he began, then stopped, listening. There was an automobile coming down off the hill, and the sound of it was different from that of the Jimerson car.

Without a word between them, they both began to know then. They watched with growing horror as it came into the yard and stopped and Cass got out, grinning at them with a sort of lost and foolish happiness. It was an old Buick, a four-door sedan with one crumpled and ironed-out fender, but polished all over until it gleamed and by far the largest and most impressive of all the secondhand cars he had ever brought home.

“Ain’t she a beauty, Mitch?” he asked with childlike pride. “Got good rubber, too, the man said. Right new tires all around.” He kicked one of them and looked at Mitch and Jessie happily.

Jessie was staring at him as if she were going to be ill. Mitch touched her arm. “Wait,” he said. “Don’t say nothing.”

It ain’t that simple this time, he thought. It ain’t like all the land he sold to buy them other seven cars, or when he sold Mexico to buy the radio. It looks almost the same, them five days it would take him to get it squared around in his mind till it would be all right and the only thing to do, but it probably wasn’t that. It probably took him the five days to collect the money. God knows where he had to go to get it.

Cass went back around to the driver’s side and blew the horn. “Listen to that, Mitch. Got a nice sound, ain’t it? And you ought to hear her growl when she gets in the sand. Got more power’n a truck.”

We could leave, Mitch thought. I could take Jessie and we could go somewhere else, and I reckon we could get along, but what would become of him? No, we couldn’t ever leave him; he’s living in another world, but he’s got to get his meals in this one. I guess we wouldn’t want to, anyhow. This is home, what there’s left of it, and all you can do is hang tight and keep on trying.

Cass took a last loving look at the car and came up on the porch with his vacant and happy grin. Jessie drew aside as he passed.

“Why don’t you take a ride in her, Mitch? You and Jessie. Take a little spin up the road and try her out.”

He stopped then, the childish pride of possession slowly fading from his face as he gazed at the window of his room. Somewhere he had lost the monstrous and insane hat, and he looked like a forlorn and blankly staring doll in the gathering dusk.

“I got to listen to the news,” he said. “Ain’t heard nothing in some time.” He walked to the window, bent over like a folding rule, and stepped through

it into his room.

“Mitch, how could he?” Jessie asked in whispered anguish. “How *could* he?”

Mitch was silent for a minute. “I don’t think he really did, Jessie,” he said. “I think he won it on the radio.”

It was just a prize they gave away in that game he was listening to, he thought. At least, that’s as near as I can figure it. God knows, it might have been better the other way, if he had deliberately sold Sewell for the reward the way he sold all the land and Mexico. I don’t think, the way it is, he even knows that Sewell’s dead. Not all the time, anyway.

He looked across the yard, seeing all the times in years ahead when he would hear the shout, and turn, waiting patiently in the endless furrow through cotton yet unborn while the same lost figure stumbled down the hill through the ever deepening and unvarying furrow of its own with the frozen arm outstretched and pointing toward the river. “It’s Sewell! It’s Sewell, Mitch! Just come over the radio!”

Well, he thought, it ain’t no use to run. If running did you any good, he wouldn’t be there himself.

